



PlayConnect+

playconnectplus.com.au

Committee Secretary, House Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care & Disability
PO Box 6021, Parliament of Australia Canberra ACT 2600 | Health.Reps@aph.gov.au

Friday 3 October 2025

Dear Committee Secretary,

On behalf of the National Early Childhood Program (NECP) *Support and connection for young children with disability or developmental concerns*, [PlayConnect+](#) project, we write to provide a submission to the Thriving Kids Inquiry. This submission draws on key findings and recommendations from the PlayConnect+ Evaluation Report (2023-2025) ('the Report') that follows and principally addresses the following from the Terms of Reference:

- Examine the effectiveness of current (and previous) programs and initiatives that identify children with development delay, autism or both, with mild to moderate support needs and support them and their families. This should focus on community and mainstream engagement, and include child and maternal health, primary care, allied health playgroups, early childhood education and care and schools.
- Identify gaps in workforce support and training required to deliver Thriving Kids.

PlayConnect+ supported playgroups are specifically for children aged 0-8 years with a disability or developmental concern, and at least 50% of this cohort presents with autism or autism-like behaviours. Families are encouraged to attend regardless of whether they have, or do not have, a formal diagnosis for their child. The emphasis is for parents/carers to act on their observations earlier and engage with broader disability supports rather than waiting for a medical diagnosis to trigger early intervention strategies. Evidence from the Report shows that regular involvement in supported playgroups leads to significant improvements in social, emotional, and cognitive development.

"Even before I started regularly going to PlayConnect, my Facilitator was helping—linking me in with services, different school options... more resourceful than the other therapist we had at the time." – Parent

Expanding partnerships across sectors will further strengthen outcomes for children with disability or developmental concerns and their families.

PlayConnect+ playgroups facilitate a gentle introduction to early supports as well as a conduit for primary prevention for families struggling to cope with their child's additional needs and, critically, where there may be a risk of harm. The Report found that once families identify a developmental delay

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there is an expressed need for ‘acceptable’ supports, such as those embedded in the PlayConnect+ environment, and which parents described as:

- facilitated in an accepting supportive environment for the infant/young child;
- child-led and individualised for diverse child and family needs;
- supportive to neurodivergent parents and families (alongside children);
- broadly accessible and universal (i.e., not exclusive to autism) and integrated with existing community-based services; and
- ideally delivered by professionals and those with relevant lived experience.

Embedding peer-to-peer support in family-centred programs will strengthen connections and increase family resilience.

Interestingly, the Report also found that parents communicate greater confidence in their parenting abilities if their child has a diagnosis compared to parents whose children are undergoing assessment. This shows that when parents have clarity, they feel more prepared to plan and act positively in relation to their family’s circumstances. For families in the pre-diagnosis phase, PlayConnect+ playgroups can facilitate peer support networks which can help with the challenges posed by this uncertainty as well as those presented by their child’s disability or developmental delay itself. PlayConnect+ families reported enhanced communication skills, increased engagement in play, and greater confidence in their children’s abilities. In essence, the pre-diagnosis support is significant to building positive family functioning and resilience.

Ongoing investment in family-centred programs will lead to thriving outcomes for children with disability or developmental concerns.

PlayConnect+ playgroups foster a supportive, safe and judgement-free environment which is conducive to increased positive outcomes for children, regardless of their background. Parents and caregivers describe the PlayConnect+ community as an environment of acceptance and those having experience with conventional early learning settings express a mix of relief and appreciation for this aspect of the program. The evaluation established that opportunities for peer support, sharing experiences, and learning strategies to assist children at home were highly valued.

“I feel Jose can be his true, authentic self—celebrated for exactly who he is.” – Parent

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Expanding similar models will ensure all children, regardless of background, can benefit from quality early childhood supports.

The nine '[Playgroup Principles](#)' underpin the design and delivery of all PlayConnect+ playgroups. Whilst there are variations in the programming/learning format, all PlayConnect+ playgroups provide an equitable experience for all children, including those living in rural and remote parts of Australia.

A core strength of PlayConnect+ is its commitment to accessibility. Playgroups are delivered face-to-face and online during school terms (0-4/5 years) and school holidays/weekends (5-8 years). In addition to the traditional playgroup format, PlayConnect+ delivery includes:

- music therapy playgroups for families preferring a music-centric lesson format;
- playgroups prioritising the enrolment of First Nations families with a focus on indigenous stories, art and music, and family support directed towards trusted culturally safe services;
- playgroups in migrant communities where cultural and linguistic perspectives inform the learning approach and support for families; and
- playgroups which partner with specialised programs that are resourced to support inclusion and engagement across a range of sectors and services.

By offering free sessions, culturally responsive facilitators, and flexible attendance options, PlayConnect+ removes barriers that might otherwise prevent families from participating. The evaluation found this approach enabled access for families facing illness/disability, family breakdown, homelessness, financial, cultural, geographical and other constraints.

Increasing capacity building of staff and supporting a culture of continuous professional learning will strengthen praxis and unlock authentic avenues of support for families.

PlayConnect+ playgroups are play-based and the learning experiences informed by child-centred pedagogies. Professionally trained staff suggest strategies to help families continue the learning at home through activities that reinforce skills and establish positive routines. PlayConnect+ facilitators also incorporate activities from the children's therapy which reinforces consistency across the home, playgroup and therapy environments.

Families are encouraged to reflect positively on their child's individual progress rather than engaging in a comparative mindset. This strength-based approach is valuable in supporting families as acknowledging their child's disability diagnosis or developmental difference can be difficult. PlayConnect+ facilitators, many of whom have lived experience, are highly skilled at guiding families through this process.

"Many Facilitators are walking the same path as you... it just really, really helps." – Parent

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Effectively engaging and supporting families such as those who are drawn to PlayConnect+ requires more than a general early childhood background or lived experience alone. Whilst these are solid foundations, it is also important to examine the elements of best practice in the context of a learning setting for children with additional needs. Resourcing training and development on a broader scale can address the disparity of workforce competencies in the sector and lead to stronger outcomes in equity.

In conclusion,

As an Australian-wide program, PlayConnect+ serves as a valuable resource in ensuring that the needs of our youngest Australians and their families are consistently supported, no matter where they live. By providing equitable access and neurodiversity affirming and inclusive environments, the program helps bridge gaps in early intervention and community engagement for children with disability or developmental concerns.

97.4% (661) parents surveyed for the SCORE process (DEX) reported an overall positive experience with PlayConnect+

We respectfully urge the Thriving Kids working group to thoroughly review The Report and consider deepening collaboration with the PlayConnect+ consortium. By working together, we can advance the development of an evidence-informed, high-quality, and child-centred system of support for children with disability or developmental concerns. Leveraging the expertise and findings from the PlayConnect+ Evaluation Report will help ensure that all children and their families receive the tailored, effective assistance they need to thrive.

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“When You’re Struggling and Someone Says, ‘Take my hand, I’m here’, It Really Helps”

Evaluation of PlayConnect+ 2023-2025

Report to Autism Queensland and the Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services

October 2025

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1. Executive Summary

Background and Aim of the Evaluation

This report describes an evaluation of PlayConnect+, 2023-2025, conducted via services agreement between La Trobe University and Autism Queensland, as a subcontract within a broader agreement between Autism Queensland and the Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services to deliver PlayConnect+ playgroups. Led by Autism Queensland and delivered by the consortium of State and Territory Playgroup Organisations, PlayConnect+ has been the delivery mechanism for the National Early Childhood Program (NECP) *Support for Children with a Disability or Developmental Concerns* initiative, offering supported playgroups in community settings including: a primary program of face-to-face playgroups running weekly during term times and similar online playgroup delivery, a school holiday/weekend playgroup program, and Sing & Grow music therapy playgroups at selected sites.

As part of the Autism Queensland-led consortium submission for NECP *Support for Children* funding, an aligned but independent evaluation was proposed for La Trobe University researchers—within our Childhood Autism and Parenting Team (CAPTeam)—to inform program activities in motion (e.g., through participation at meetings and input into 6-monthly Activity Work Plan reporting) and deliver an evaluation and report toward the funding endpoint (initially mid-2025, but noting the announced two-year funding extension such that PlayConnect+ is continuing to mid-2027).

Evaluation Plan and Oversight

La Trobe University researchers were engaged to provide: a) early input into programmatic data collection and reporting; b) ongoing evaluation support across the program delivery period; and c) independent evaluation activities with a broad focus on understanding whether and how PlayConnect+ is effectively engaging families and benefitting children, and how PlayConnect+ runs across the range of delivery options and settings, nationally.

We developed a multi-method plan of hierarchically organised evaluation options, including the potential: a) collation and quantitative analysis of program-level data (i.e., group-level and individual Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting [SCORE] data); b) undertaking of in-depth, semi-structured stakeholder interviews (i.e., with staff working in various roles, and families engaged with PlayConnect+); and c) attending and directly observing PlayConnect+ sessions for objective, first-person insights of their conduct and the staff and family experience.

We led an Evaluation Working Group with representation from staff at Autism Queensland (as national lead agency), and delegates from the State and Territory Playgroup Organisations, who supported the direction of evaluation activities and local stakeholder participation. We also attended and reported on progress at quarterly PlayConnect+ Steering Committee meetings and at regular Community of Practice sessions, and secured La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approval for the overarching evaluation work and two specific projects—around the conduct of PlayConnect+ Staff Interviews and Family Experience interviews.

In the program establishment phase, we also worked with Autism Queensland staff to select and refine Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting (SCORE) survey items for PlayConnect+, including advising on wording, presentation, and collection processes in seeking to maximise family engagement whilst minimising burden on staff. Thereafter, Autism Queensland led the synthesis of SCORE data for regular Activity Work Plan reporting and by mutual agreement, researcher resources were put instead toward other options within the outline evaluation plan.

Insights from Interviews with PlayConnect+ Staff

With Evaluation Working Group support and following La Trobe University HREC approval, we interviewed PlayConnect+ Staff in various roles, seeking insights into their perspectives and experiences of the program, and offering by-proxy accounts on the experiences of families. First-round interviews with 34 staff working in any role were conducted in early/mid 2024, with representation across all States and Territories, regional as well as metropolitan areas, and areas of relatively greater vs. lesser socio-economic disadvantage. We conducted follow-up interviews late in 2024 with 21 staff in Facilitator or Assistant roles, to seek feedback on our preliminary findings, and in mid 2025, toward the end of the original NECP funding period, we spoke again with 7 Coordinators/Managers.

As summarised in the *Thematic Map on Staff Insights*, and illustrated via quotes (Section 5; noting, all names are pseudonyms) PlayConnect+ Staff told us about the variety of participants **Who PlayConnect+ Serves** (Staff Insights Theme 1), including Children with Various Presentations of Autism (Subtheme 1.1) and Children with Diverse Medical, Developmental and Behavioural Needs (Subtheme 1.2), as well as Families with Non-Specific Concerns for their Children (Subtheme 1.3) and Families with Diverse Support Needs for Other Members or the Family Unit (Subtheme

1.4). Staff also told us about **How PlayConnect+ Works** (Staff Insights Theme 2). Here, Facilitators/Assistants emphasised the critical role for Play as the Starting Point (Subtheme 2.1), offering a low demand way to foster family engagement and trust. Staff in all roles highlighted four additional key features relevant to program success. PlayConnect+ is founded on a Strengths-Based Approach (Subtheme 2.2) and offers A Tailored Experience (Subtheme 2.3) to meet individual family needs. We also heard compelling accounts of Staff and Families Sharing Experiences and Responsibilities (Subtheme 2.4) and of PlayConnect+ as inherently Collaborative: Group Members Working Together (Subtheme 2.5), suggesting equal staff-family status and the fostering of parental empowerment.

Moreover, the insights shared by staff coalesced around what we felt to be the **Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+** (Staff Insights Theme 3). These include a multifaceted emphasis on Consistency: of Sessions, Groups and the Program (Subtheme 3.1), and strong conviction for Non-Judgement: Families Feel Safe (Subtheme 3.2), both advocated as critical to any efforts to engage and retain families, and thereby provide effective support. Following clarification with Facilitators/Assistants in our follow-up interviews, we also understood an additional two core values to be that Families Decide (Subtheme 3.3) and that their Trust is Earned (Subtheme 3.4). The various examples shared with us articulated the care taken and range of efforts made by PlayConnect+ Staff—working in different roles and in different organisations across the country—to seek genuine improvement for local families and communities.

Our follow-up interviews with the small subgroup of Coordinators/Managers offered the chance to hear **broader reflections from these individuals in programmatic leadership roles**. However, as these occurred following announcement of a two-year NECP funding extension, we also asked these staff for forward-looking suggestions. These staff shared their impression of substantial recent growth in community demand for PlayConnect+, and of a changing profile among the children of newly engaged families (viewed as positive, but also bringing new challenges). Staff reported their teams were engaging families from First Nations and Cultural and Linguistic Diversity backgrounds, but conveyed variable confidence in their capacity to do so effectively, and shared some insights on potential barriers arising for such groups with complex, intersecting needs. They also reflected more broadly that current capacity for PlayConnect+ delivery was barely ‘scratching the surface’ of community need.

Coordinators/Managers shared practical considerations around such matters as access to appropriate, affordable venues, the demand and resourcing requirements for online playgroup delivery, and their experiences of the school holiday/weekend playgroups. On the experience of a single-State, 12-month trial of staff in a formal PlayConnect+ *Linker* role, some staff advocated this as a strong value-add while others saw the potential but felt resources could be better spent providing training and ongoing support for staff engaged as group Facilitators/Assistants. Indeed, staff retention and capacity were strongly advocated as critical to PlayConnect+ success, and worthy of close attention and adequate resourcing (including to train, upskill and support, and ultimately retain excellent staff).

Staff conveyed that the 2-year NECP funding extension was welcome news, but also highlighted challenges to future implementation given increasing program delivery costs (since initial budgeting in 2022). On programmatic oversight, they valued that decision-making power was retained locally—each State and Territory Playgroup Organisation empowered to identify local needs and effective solutions—and also the regular opportunity for discussion and collaborative problem-solving within Community of Practice sessions. Across jurisdictions, staff highlighted challenges inherent to regional/remote delivery, with lower population density but relatively high resourcing need. They also acknowledged challenges with data collection—to meet contractual reporting requirements and aligned evaluation activities—but emphasised strong value in these activities and their motivation to contribute to evaluation. Staff shared views on matters relevant to policy (e.g., a potential place for PlayConnect+ in the context of anticipated future ‘Foundational Supports’ funding) and relevant contemporary socio-cultural issues (i.e., on the perceived ongoing benefits of specialised/segregated supports even as community perspectives shift in favour of the meaningful inclusion of people with disability/neurodivergence in mainstream settings).

These **senior staff offered several considerations as key forward-looking priorities**: 1) to secure increased and long-term funding for PlayConnect+; 2) to continually strive to reach and maximise participation from families in known underrepresented groups; 3) to continue local partnership development and leverage aspirational cross-system coordination and alignment; 4) to target effort toward PlayConnect+ staff professional development; 5) to further diversify PlayConnect+ such as through more, informal, in-community engagement options; and 6) for future evaluation activities to find ways to capture and convey children’s own experiences of PlayConnect+.

Insights from PlayConnect+ Family Experience Interviews

With endorsement of the Evaluation Working Group and La Trobe University HREC approval, and with substantial support from individual PlayConnect+ Facilitators/Assistants and Coordinators/Managers to connect us with families, we undertook a series of interviews seeking insights into parent/carer personal experiences of

PlayConnect+ and reflections on their children’s developmental needs and experiences of participation to date. We conducted these interviews from mid/late 2024 through early/mid 2025, speaking to 21 parents/carers from 20 families (i.e., two parents of one child each choosing to participate in individual interviews). The families represented all States and Territories, with distribution broadly consistent with relative State/Territory population size. Most were in major cities, but with one third were from regional centres, and with some spread in terms of relatively socio-economically disadvantaged (indexed by postcode). There was some representation from families identifying from First Nations and Cultural and Linguistic Diversity backgrounds, but most families spoke English at home. They indicated having been engaged with PlayConnect+ for various periods of time—from few months to 2 years—and most shared their experiences attending face-to-face playgroups albeit with some representation from families with experience of the online-, school holiday/weekend-, and Sing & Grow music therapy playgroups.

We designed this study so that families would experience their participation like a ‘telehealth clinical consultation’, and collected data in a variety of ways. We began by asking parents/carers just to talk about their child and family (a Five Minute Speech Sample). Toward the end of the session we asked them to provide Satisfaction Ratings (on a 10-point scale; from ‘not at all’ to ‘completely’) for aspects of their life, and specifically for PlayConnect+. Most session time followed a semi-structured conversational interview format where we asked parent/carers to tell us their experiences of and views about PlayConnect+ and associated services and support needs. In most cases, we also met the child/ren on camera, and observed them in short free-play and snack activities with their parents/carers.

Most (but not all) adults we spoke to were women and biological parents, and were the children’s full-time primary carers. Around half disclosed their own disability or neurodivergence condition. The children they described, and many of whom we met, were 10 boys and 10 girls aged <2 to 8 years (average = 3.5); some with complex medical/genetic conditions, some with diagnosed conditions (e.g., autism, ADHD) and others currently undergoing developmental assessment, and some with identified developmental/language delays. Some parents/carers described relevant conditions among the other family members if no particular concerns for their ‘target’ child.

When first asked to speak about their children (the Five Minute Speech Sample), most parents/carers used descriptions and non-verbal behaviours (e.g., tone of voice) that signalled these parent-child dyads were getting along well together. However, we did note around a quarter of families presenting a more ‘idiosyncratic’ picture such that might signal an increased risk of adverse outcomes in later life (and thereby higher support needs). For instance, some parents made several critical remarks, conveyed lower warmth, or implied a somewhat taxing relationship when talking about their children. There was a trend for these indications of less positive parent-child relationship to be in cases where children were undergoing assessment (vs. had a confirmed diagnosis) and where the parent/carer did not disclose some related lived experience (vs. in families with parent/carer disability/neurodivergence). Most **parents/carers rated satisfaction with** their own life, and with their child’s life, as high (but with some rating these ‘low’ or ‘moderate’), and most generally rated belief in having the parenting skills they need as high (although again with a spread of scores, indicating some felt only moderately so). **Almost all parents/carers we spoke to offered high satisfaction ratings for their PlayConnect+ experience**, with over half signalling *complete* satisfaction (10/10).

As summarised in the *Thematic Map on Family Experiences* and illustrative quotes (Section 6; again, attributed to pseudonyms) we heard parent/carer experiences coalesce around what we considered to be **Core PlayConnect+ Principles** (Family Experience Theme 1). These families described their PlayConnect+ playgroups as places with “*Absolutely Zero Judgement*” (Subtheme 1.1) and with Safety as a Fundamental Foundation for Parents and Children alike (Subtheme 1.2). Parents/carers appreciated the Flexible Structure (Subtheme 1.3) created by PlayConnect+ staff, with a welcome balance of session-to-session predictability coupled with no expectation for children or adults to engage in any particular way. They also described with gratitude how “*Differences are embraced*” (Subtheme 1.4), conveying how PlayConnect+ was somewhere their children, and they too, could be their authentic selves.

A key benefit of PlayConnect+ perceived by the parents/carers we spoke to was in the **Peer-to-Peer Support** (Family Experience Theme 2) it offered; the occasion and place to connect with others in similar situations, including the staff in Facilitator and Assistant roles, and other families alike. The group was described as “*A Tight-Knit Community*” (Subtheme 2.1). Parents/carers conveyed strong appreciation for how “*When You’re Struggling and Someone Says, ‘Take my Hand, I’m Here’, It Really Helps*” (Subtheme 2.2), underscoring the care and effort staff put into meeting each family where they are at, and responding accordingly. There was also clear Valuing of Staff Lived Experience (Subtheme 2.3), with parents/carers explaining how they felt the similar personal lived experiences of staff were key to their sensitivity and effectiveness. It is perhaps unsurprising that most descriptions of peer-to-peer support we heard from parents/carers were about adult-to-adult connection. However, they did also describe seeing their children form meaningful connections—“*He’s just made so many little friends*” (Subtheme 2.4)—some directly contrasting their experience of child connection at PlayConnect+ with the absence of such in other settings/groups.

Finally, whilst reporting how much they valued, and felt they themselves and their children were benefitting from PlayConnect+ participation, some families we spoke to did share experiences of issues with **Access and Availability** (Family Experience Theme 3). Some parents/carers lamented the program had been Hard to Find out About and Join (Subtheme 3.1). But positively, we also heard Parents Want More of PlayConnect+ (Subtheme 3.2), with our interviewees variously proposing how having more groups, longer sessions, and/or more sessions running across the year would better meet their own and other families' needs for continuity of support and connection. Some families also raised the view that effectively engaging the target cohort could include opening up access to families with children above the current upper limit of age 8 years—whether for functional relevance and/or practical need.

While our primary analysis and reporting of family experiences of PlayConnect+ draws on insights abstracted-, and quantitative data aggregated across the sample of 21 parents/carers (from 20 families), we have also honed in on **six case examples** that offer **further illustration of the various ways in which PlayConnect+ seems to be effectively serving families**; by 1) Providing support for children, 2) Providing support for parents/carers, 3) Offering a welcoming, inclusive environment, and 4) Supporting families in difficult circumstances, and with specific examples of perceived 5) Effective support via online-, and 6) Valued support via Sing & Grow music therapy playgroups.

Recommendations and Conclusions

From our formal evaluation activities and other insights gleaned through regular participation in Steering Committee and other PlayConnect+ consortium meetings across 2023-2025, **we conclude that PlayConnect+ is meeting the NECP Support for Children objectives** of creating opportunities for child and family connection, and building parent/carer capacity and confidence to support the development of their young children with disability or related concerns. Staff told us about the families attending their PlayConnect+ groups with children with autism and diverse other conditions/needs. We also met with a sample of PlayConnect+ families representing various socio-demographic circumstances. Staff and parents/carers shared with us how PlayConnect+ works—through play as a starting point, with a strengths-based and tailored focus thereafter, and with group members effectively connecting to create inclusive, supportive 'tight-knit communities'. We heard strong alignment in Core Values conveyed by staff and key Principles described by families: of how PlayConnect+ offers consistency/structure and flexibility/tailoring, and fosters genuine non-judgement ("*differences are embraced*") and peer-to-peer connection for mutual support. However delivery/access barriers were also shared, including limited resources to address substantial growing need.

Our recommendations span three broad domains. First, we encourage **PlayConnect+ to continue core operations as usual**, trusting in the insights of group and program staff who have deep knowledge and strong commitment to making a genuine difference for families—locally and through national collaboration. We recommend continuing efforts to reach and maximise participation from families in known under-represented groups (e.g., meaningfully engaging community elders/leaders to support family trust and engagement, similar to have staff lived-experience of disability/neurodivergence seems to be an effective enabler). Relatedly, we advise considered resourcing toward supporting the ongoing professional development of Facilitators/Assistants, including around their capacity to support parents/carers (as a self-identified skill/confidence gap) and in order to secure retention of these valuable staff. We also suggest maintaining the current balance of PlayConnect+ delivery options—which seems to be working well—but encourage consideration of the relative benefits of term vs. holiday programs, and outreach activity options.

Our **key recommendations for policy** include that PlayConnect+ receive ongoing and appropriately-indexed funding, as a foundational community support model which seems to be effectively engaging and servicing a representative group (if still relatively small segment) of children with disabilities/developmental concerns and their families. Moreover, we would argue that PlayConnect+ does more than offer *Support for Children*; also offering effective and relatively low-cost *Support for Families* by creating inclusive, welcoming places where parents/carers with their own evident high support needs and at risk of social isolation can be their authentic selves whilst building community connection, and gaining skills and confidence. That is, PlayConnect+ seems to offer an effective 'soft-entry' foundational support for families to make successful connection with community, toward other service access, including mainstream inclusive options. Finally here, while evidence (from our own work, and the broader literature) suggests the benefits of supported playgroups for children and families, we would advocate the need for investment in large-scale evaluation running in parallel to service delivery, to develop a rigorous evidence base needed to confidently appraise the benefits and opportunities of PlayConnect+ for children, families, and society-at-large—to really understand 'What works for Whom? How? And Why?'—noting similar programs of community-academic partnership work previously funded or currently in motion in the Australian early years autism and disability space.

Finally, we **propose next-stage evaluation options**, e.g.: growing our Family Experience interview sample size; hearing updates from families we have already met; seeking input from children directly; and continuing to hear from staff on family experiences by proxy, including those with the greatest support needs (unlikely to speak with us directly).

2. Background and Aim of the Evaluation

Commonwealth Funding: NECP Support for Children

The National Early Childhood Program (NECP), funded by the Department of Social Services (DSS), is a comprehensive initiative designed to support families with young children (0-8 years) who have a disability or emerging developmental concerns. The NECP encompasses three key areas of activity:

- a) Support for Children
- b) Support for Parents
- c) Provision of Online Resources and Information

This report focuses specifically on the *Support for Children* activity, where the primary aim is to offer support and facilitate connection for young children with disability or developmental concerns. This is achieved through **PlayConnect+**, a national program of regular, facilitated, community-based supports—DSS activity ID 4-HXAFUIH.

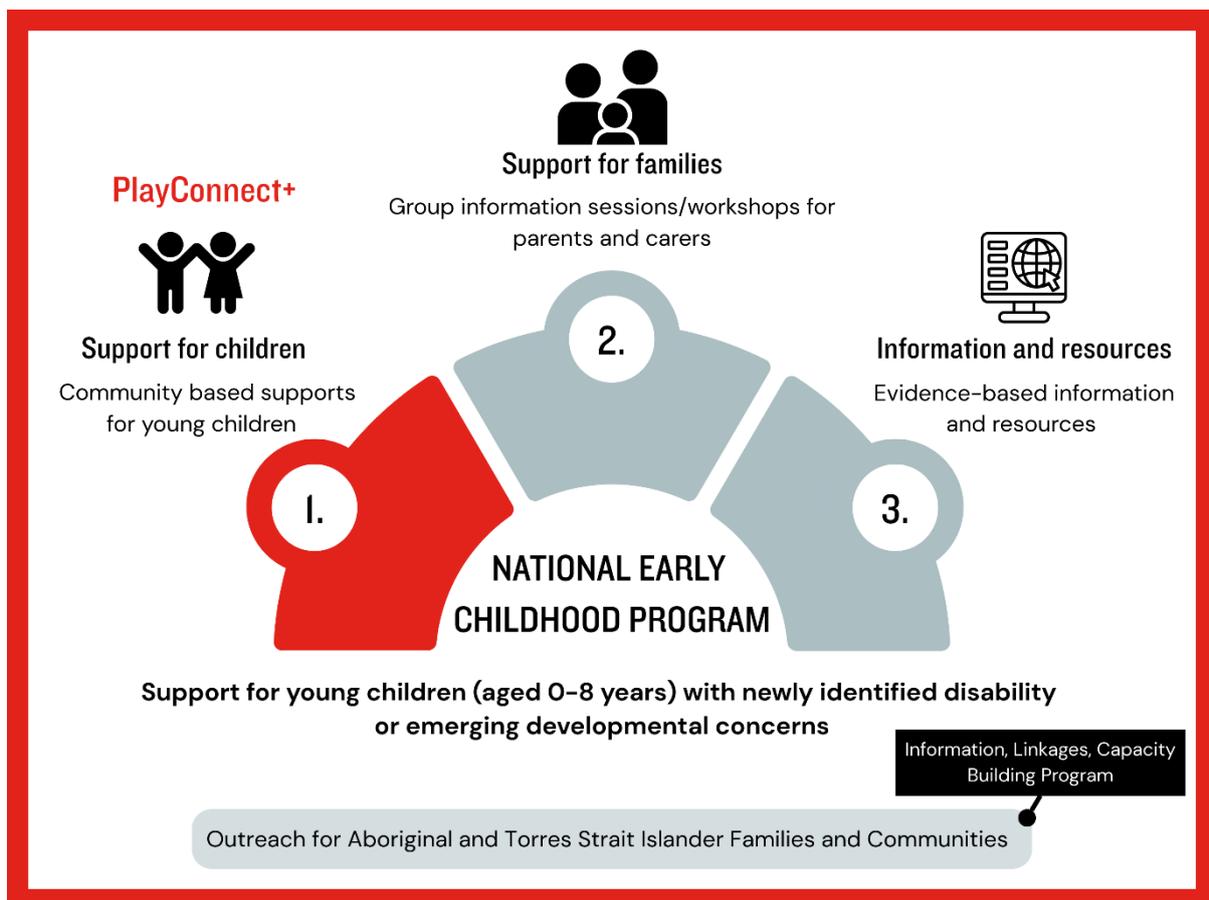


Figure 1. The National Early Childhood Program (NECP) and connecting activities

PlayConnect+ is specifically for young children aged 0-8 years who have a disability or developmental concerns. Program operations commenced in February 2023, with the core objectives of:

- Providing opportunities for these children and their siblings to socialise with peers within a supported, family-centred environment; and
- Increasing children's readiness for educational environments.

To achieve these objectives, supports are delivered through regular sessions, occurring once or more weekly (and no less than fortnightly) during school terms, at consistent, designated locations.

The specific intended outcomes of the *NECP Support for Children* activity ID 4-HXAFUIH are:

- Increased social interaction and connection, and school readiness, for children with disability or developmental concerns;
- Increased capability for parents/carers to support their children's development and prepare them for learning environments;
- Reduced family need to access more intensive supports later on, by ensuring children have access to early supports for improved social skills and readiness for learning environments; and
- The engagement of children/families from potentially vulnerable or priority groups, including but not limited to:
 - Families from First Nations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) and Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CALD) backgrounds;
 - Parents/carers experiencing illness or disability;
 - Families experiencing breakdown, homelessness, or low socio-economic circumstances; and
 - Families living in regional or remote areas of Australia.

PlayConnect+ Program Delivered by National Consortium of State and Territory Playgroup Organisations

PlayConnect+, as a program of supported playgroups, is proposed to meet the *NECP Support for Children* activity objectives, by:

- Providing free of charge, regular opportunities for children to interact and socialise with others with similar experiences of disability or developmental concern;
- Delivering tailored supports for children with specific disabilities (including autism or autism-like characteristics), and services that are safe and inclusive for children within other priority cohorts;
- Providing suggestions for potential connections to parents and carers; and
- Promoting the *NECP and Support for Children* activity to community early childhood services and professionals for incoming referrals.

PlayConnect+ is delivered by a national consortium of State and Territory Playgroup Organisations, with oversight from Autism Queensland and input from a range of community stakeholder groups. NECP funding was initially awarded for PlayConnect+ across a three-year period (2022-2025). An extension of program funding for a further two years (2025-2027) was announced by the Commonwealth Government in February 2025 (through 2027).

This evaluation and report focus on activities undertaken during the initial funding period.

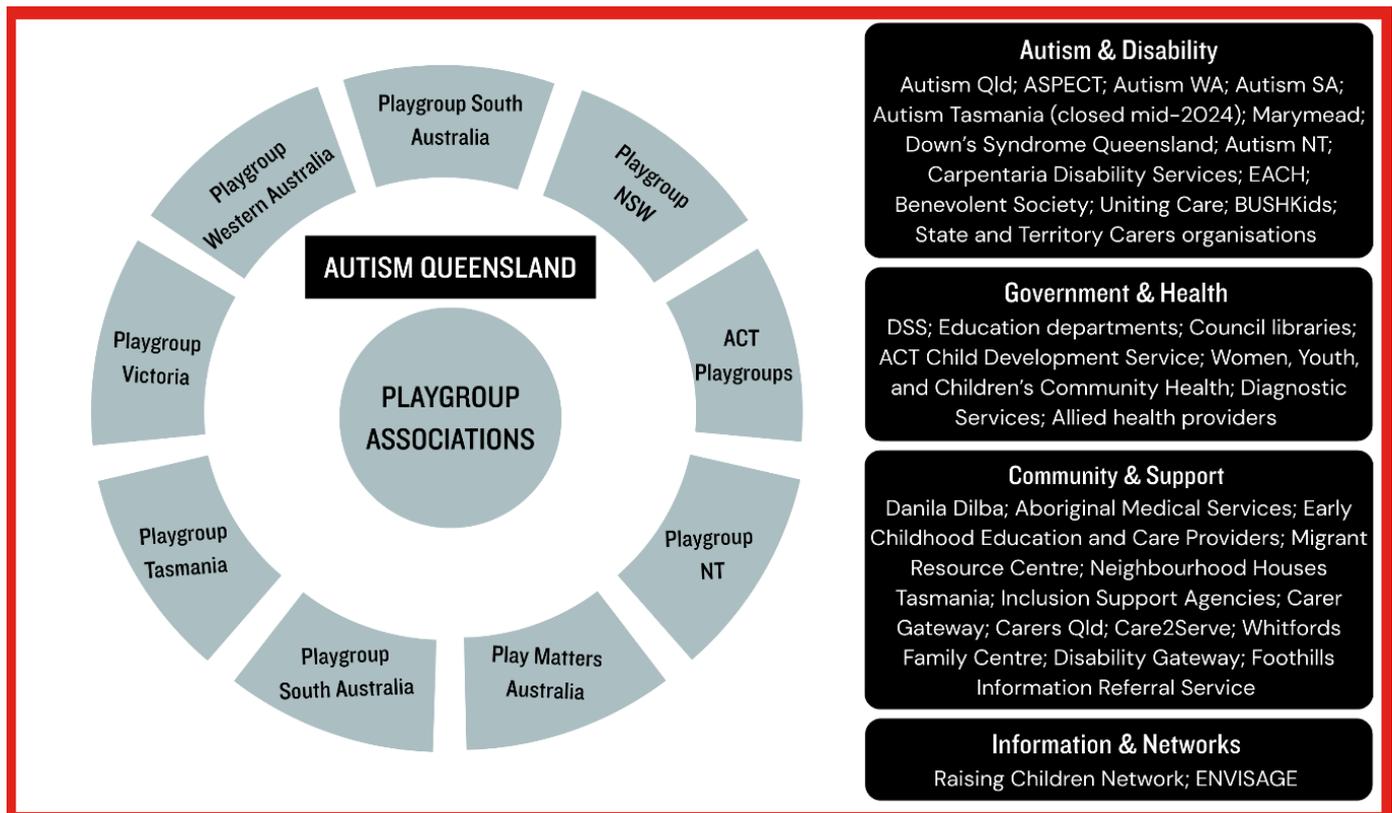
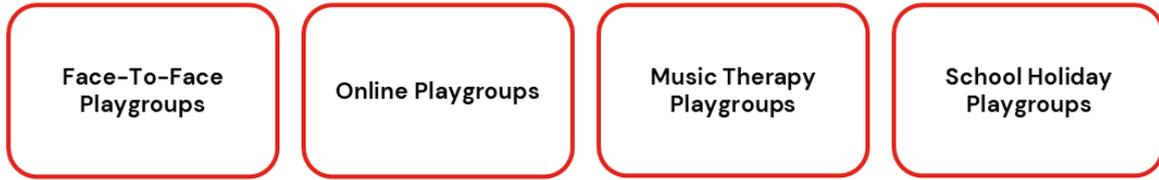
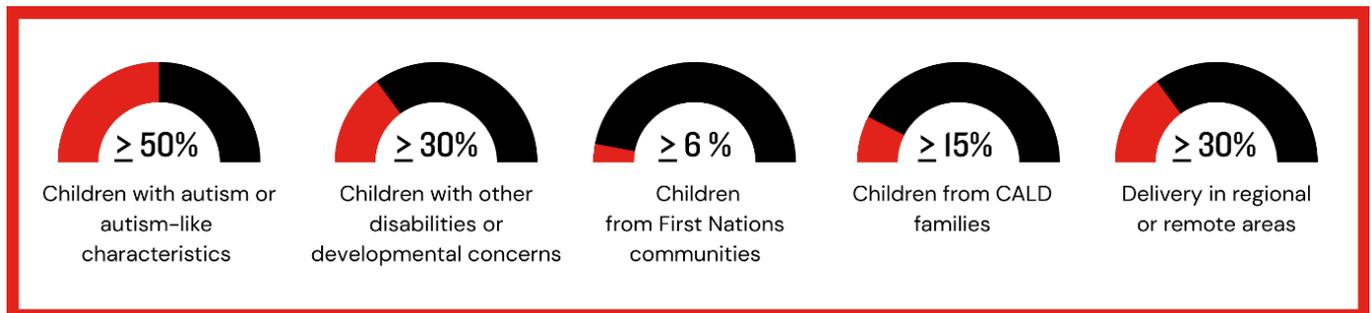


Figure 2. National Consortium delivering PlayConnect+ and community partners

The proposal for *NECP Support for Children* to be delivered through PlayConnect+ included offering four key types of supported playgroup for young children with disability or developmental concerns and their families, across all States and Territories, including reach to regional and remote location:



Specific deliverables and minimum performance indicators were proposed to include (but not be limited to):



The State and Territory Playgroup Organisations had responsibility to collect data and monitor how well PlayConnect+ was meeting the intended objectives and outcomes in their local region, including against targets to:

- Commence face-to-face services from metropolitan and regional areas in February 2023; and
- Grow face-to-face playgroup delivery into remote areas, and offer online delivery, for full operation, by June 2023.

Individual providers would also have responsibility to undertake ongoing recording and monitoring of:

- The delivery locations, numbers of sessions, and numbers of children attending face-to-face playgroups; and
- Registration and attendance, and the demographic characteristics of families joining online playgroups.

PlayConnect+ delivery was planned as a multi-modal program, to maximize reach and be responsive to diverse family needs, through supported:

- Face-to-face playgroups, central to the PlayConnect+ model, and featuring five key elements illustrated here;
- Selected online playgroups;
- School holiday/weekend playgroup delivery, and
- Sing & Grow music therapy playgroups at selected sites.

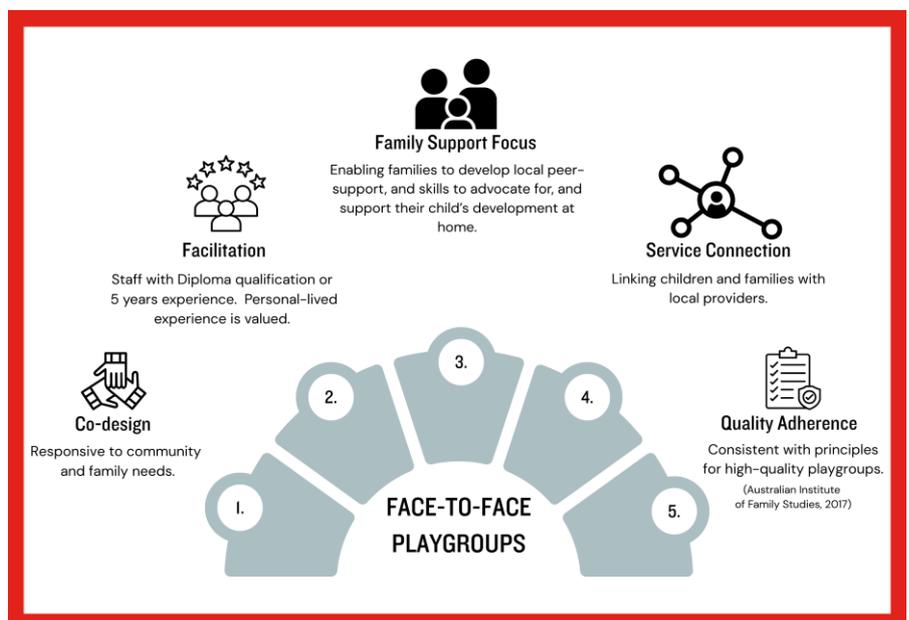


Figure 3. Core tenets of PlayConnect+ program with multi-modal delivery

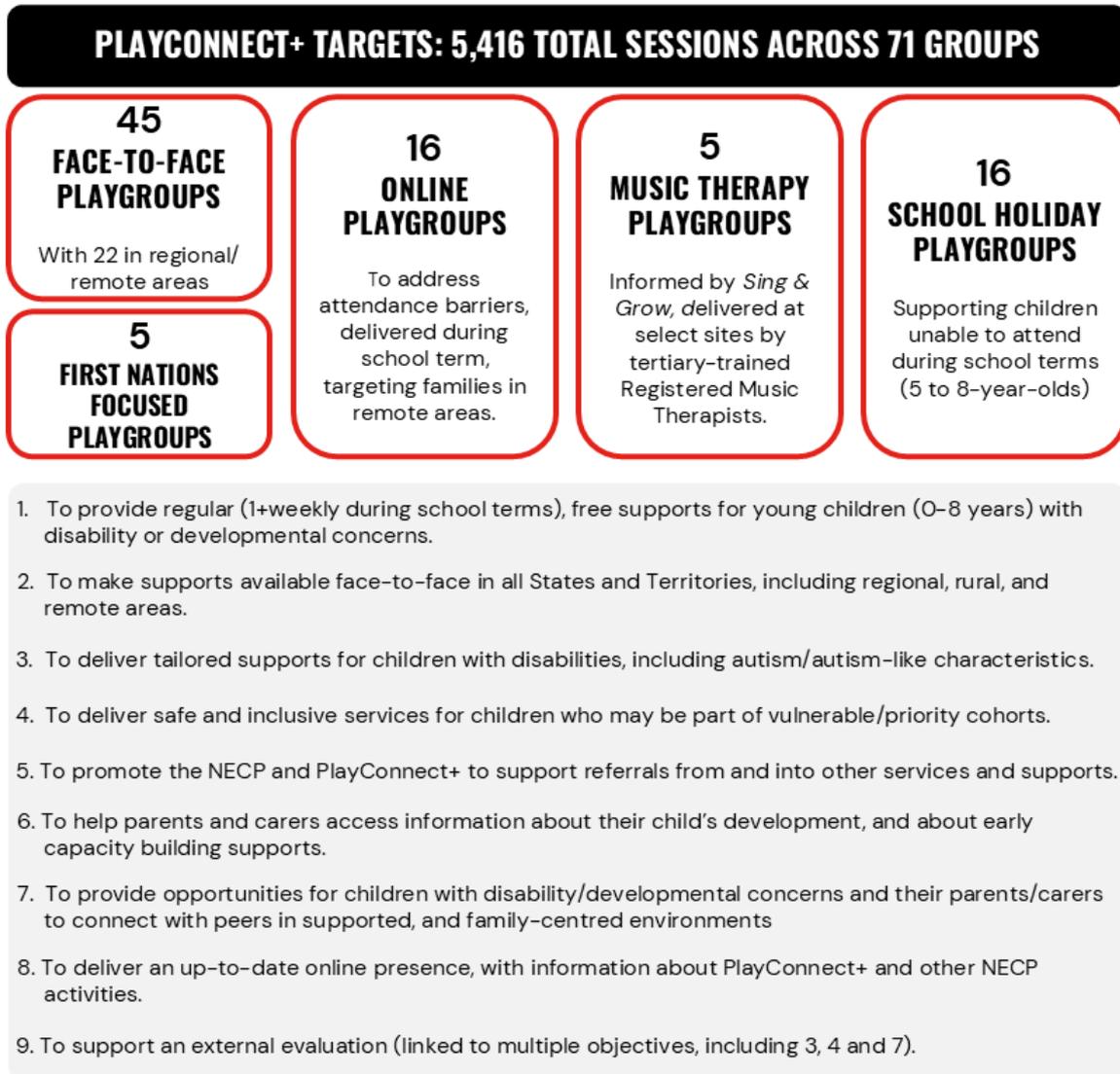


Figure 4. Summary objectives and deliverables of NECP Support for Children funding for PlayConnect+

Activity Reporting Plan and Objectives

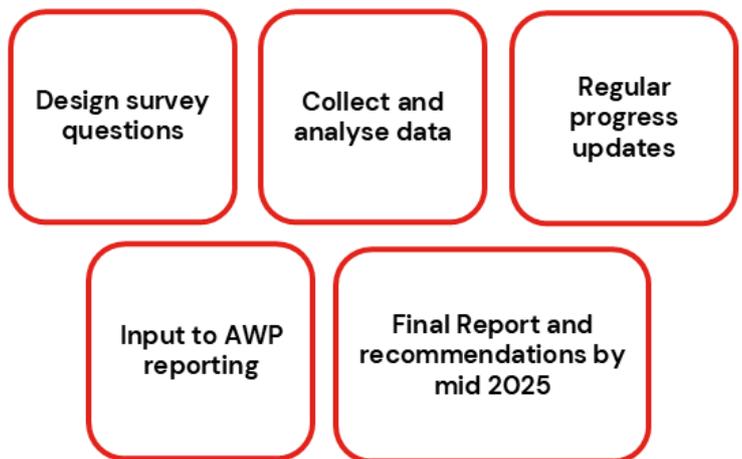
As lead agency of NECP Support for Children, Autism Queensland led Activity Work Plan (AWP) reporting to the commonwealth Department of Social Services (DSS; ID 4-HXAFUIH) at 6-monthly intervals across 2023-2025. With regional input provided by the State and Territory Playgroup Organisations, AWP reporting was against nine overarching objectives (summarised below) encompassing a range of concrete deliverables and Measures of Success (MoS), and with various timeframes for anticipated completion (i.e., some early on for program establishment; others ongoing across the initial NECP funding period).

3. Evaluation Plan and Oversight

Agreements and Reporting Plan

The Autism Queensland led consortium engaged researchers at La Trobe University to provide ongoing evaluation support and independent quality review across 2023-2025, including through:

- Designing survey questions mapped to DSS-required Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting (SCORE);
- Collecting data from partner organisations delivering PlayConnect+ and undertaking analysis;
- Engaging regularly in and reporting at progress meetings, including with lead agency (Autism Queensland) staff, formal PlayConnect+ Steering Committee meetings, and at other fora scheduled by mutual agreement; and
- Providing to the lead agency and/or Steering Committee:
 - Input into six-monthly Activity Work Plan reporting (ID 4-HXAFUIH), including contributions based on data collection and analysis undertaken/in progress;
 - Recommendations contributing to the ongoing, continuous improvement of PlayConnect+ delivery; and
 - An evaluation Final Report (i.e., this document) by mid 2025, with project outcomes and recommendations.



With input from stakeholders during program establishment meetings, La Trobe University researchers developed an initial Evaluation Plan, presented to Autism Queensland, the Steering Committee, and DSS in October 2023.

This plan, illustrated below, outlined non-exclusive evaluation options (i.e., some likely to supersede others) to be further considered and pursued by the research team working with external collaborators, in ongoing consultation with the lead agency National Program Coordinator and regular input from an established Evaluation Working Group.

The Evaluation Plan was designed to address three key questions:

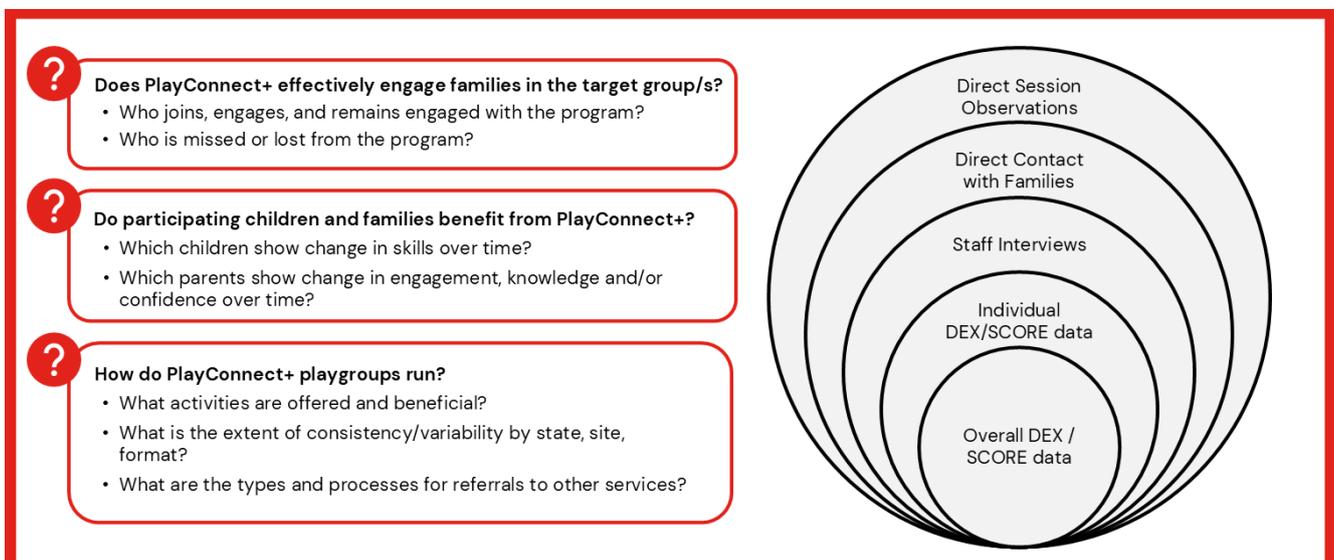


Figure 5. Indicative questions and study design options for multi-method evaluation

Input into Activity Work Plan Reporting

Among the objectives featuring in regular Activity Work Plan (AWP) reporting by Autism Queensland to the Commonwealth DSS, one was specifically related to this Evaluation, with others also relevant:

1. To provide regular (1+weekly during school terms), free supports for young children (0–8 years) with disability or developmental concerns.
2. To make supports available face-to-face in all States and Territories, including regional, rural, and remote areas.
3. To deliver tailored supports for children with disabilities, including autism/autism-like characteristics.
4. To deliver safe and inclusive services for children who may be part of vulnerable/priority cohorts.
5. To promote the NECP and PlayConnect+ to support referrals from and into other services and supports.
6. To help parents and carers access information about their child’s development, and about early capacity building supports.
7. To provide opportunities for children with disability/developmental concerns and their parents/carers to connect with peers in supported, and family-centred environments
8. To deliver an up-to-date online presence, with information about PlayConnect+ and other NECP activities.
9. To support an external evaluation (linked to multiple objectives, including 3, 4 and 7).

Figure 6. Objectives relevant to evaluation questions and activities

Specific deliverables under these objectives included:

- Execution of a Service Agreement (dated May 2023) for La Trobe University researchers to:
 - Design data collection strategies and materials;
 - Contribute to continuous improvement and an evaluation Final Report; and including
 - The prioritisation of case studies/examples and focus on community connection/referrals.
- Preparation of an Evaluation Plan (dated October 2023), to be reviewed six-monthly; and
- Subsequent update for deliverables to also include:
 - The leadership of a PlayConnect+ Evaluation Working Group;
 - The design and implementation of staff evaluation and additional parent/carer evaluation activities (i.e., the latter, beyond that already planned within DSS-mandated SCORE Survey data collection); and
 - The provision of progress reports to the PlayConnect+ Steering Committee, which thereby met in:
 - 2023** on 23rd August and 22nd November
 - 2024** on 21st February, 27th May, 17th September and 4th December
 - 2025** on 4th March and 21st May

Oversight Committees and Working Groups

PlayConnect+ Evaluation Working Group

An Evaluation Working Group was convened with representation from Autism Queensland as lead agency, and from most State and Territory Playgroup Organisations, to support decision-making and progress review. Initial meetings to plan submissions for Human Research Ethics Committee review (for staff and family experience interviews) were held on:

2023 18th October, 29th November, 13th December

2024 31st January, 28th February.

Thereafter, Evaluation Working Group meetings continued fortnightly or monthly, as practicable given members' availabilities and project consultation needs.

Human Research Ethics Committee Oversight

Three submissions were made for LTU Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) review; for:

- The overall evaluation activities
→ **LTU HEC 23091** approved **11th May, 2023**;
- Staff interview conduct, analysis and reporting
→ **LTU HEC24026** approved **28th February, 2024**
- Family interview conduct, analysis and reporting
→ **LTU HEC24045** approved **15th April, 2024**

Research Team Meetings

Lead researchers at La Trobe University (LTU) met fortnightly with the PlayConnect+ National Program Coordinator (Autism Queensland) to monitor and support progress.

The Evaluation Lead also convened a group of other local (La Trobe University) and external research partners, who supported evaluation planning, data collection and analysis, and co-authored this report.

RESEARCH TEAM

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

A/Prof. Kristelle Hudry: Project Lead; Psychology
Alexandra Aulich: Project Coordinator
Dr Catherine Bent, Psychology
Dr Cherie Green, Psychology
Dr Melanie Muniandy, Psychology
Ms Katherine Pye, Health Economics; Speech Pathology
Dr Jodie Smith, Speech Pathology

UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Prof. Luke Smillie, Psychology

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Prof. Leonie Segal, Health Economics

Programmatic Working Group and Community of Practice

Autism Queensland convened and led two further groups. A Programmatic Working Group met monthly earlier on during the service delivery activities, with particular focus on teaching and learning content, including professional development for PlayConnect+ Facilitators. The goals of this group included streamlining curriculum development and establishing some consistency across all regional local delivery.

A Community of Practice also met monthly across the service delivery period. This was open to any staff at the State and Territory Playgroup Organisations and generally represented by local program Managers and Coordinators and a La Trobe University researcher. The focus here was to have a forum for regular sharing of information and ideas, and troubleshooting any arising issues experienced by local teams or collectively.

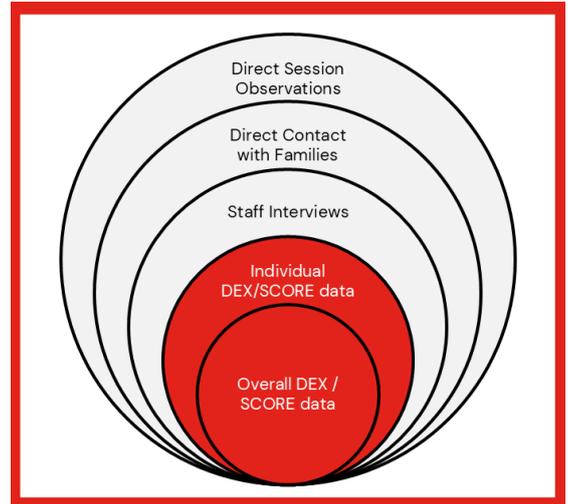
4. Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting (SCORE)

Context of this Evaluation Component

This evaluation component was represented within Option A of those proposed within the original prepared Evaluation Plan, and Human Research Ethics Committee approval secured by La Trobe University researchers through project Ref. HEC23091 (dated 11th May, 2023).

Contractual Requirements for SCORE Data Collection

Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting (SCORE) refers to Department of Social Services (DSS)-mandated data to be collected from individual participating children/families by local group staff and entered locally by State and Territory Playgroup Organisation staff into the Commonwealth government’s Data Exchange (DEX) portal.



SCORE items for collection for reporting of the NECP Support for Children program, were proposed by DSS and Autism Queensland within three broad categories:

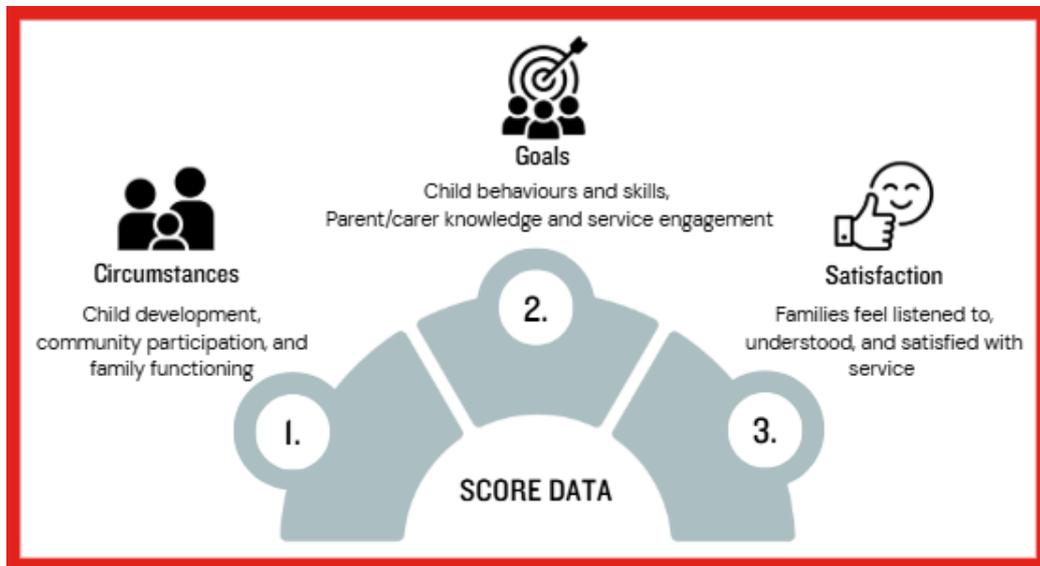


Figure 7. Summary Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting (SCORE) domains

The Department of Social Services (DSS) stipulated the following timeframes for SCORE data collection:

- Circumstances SCORE:** An initial and at least one later assessment timepoint, for at least 50% of participants;
- Goals SCORE:** An initial and at least one later assessment, for at least 50% of participants; and
- Satisfaction SCORE** assessment/s for at least 50% of participants.

Further guidance from DSS included that SCORE assessments should be recorded:

- Near the beginning of a participant’s engagement with PlayConnect+; and
- Thereafter, at a minimum of 6-monthly intervals throughout engagement (where >6 months); and/or
- Towards the end of a participant’s engagement with PlayConnect+.

Researcher Input into SCORE Item Selection and Presentation to Families

LTU Researchers worked with lead agency (Autism Queensland) staff early in the program funding period to agree and finalise SCORE item selection and consider aspects of wording and presentation to families.

The following suggested wording and display was proposed, seeking to minimise response burden for families, and supporting potential literacy issues with simple wording and visual scaling:

| SCORE Circumstances 1-3: Age-Appropriate Child Development, Community Participation/Networks, Family Functioning | | | | |
|--|--|---------|---|---------------------|
| Overall, my child... | ... understand and complete PlayConnect+ Playgroup activities | | | |
| | Finds it very hard to... | | | Finds it easy to... |
| | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 5 |
| I feel my child has... | ... opportunities to build relationships with other children like them | | | |
| | No... | Some... | | Many... |
| | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 5 |
| I feel that I... | ... what I need to support my child's development | | | |
| | Do not have... | | | Do have... |
| | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 5 |

| SCORE Goals 1-4: Changed Behaviours, Knowledge/Access to Information, Skills, Engagement with Relevant Support Services | | | | |
|---|---|--------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| My child... | ... participates well in PlayConnect+ Playgroup activities | | | |
| | Never/Rarely... | Sometimes... | | Mostly/Always... |
| | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 5 |
| I believe I have... | ... about my child's needs | | | |
| | No idea... | Some idea... | | A clear idea... |
| | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 5 |
| I believe my child... | ... school-ready | | | |
| | Is not at all becoming... | | | Will be... (when the time is right) |
| | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 5 |
| I am... | ... connected with services that support me in helping my child | | | |
| | Not connected | Connected, with little support | | Well-connected and supported |
| | 1 | | | |
| | | 2 | 3 | 4 5 |

| SCORE Satisfaction 1-3: Service Listened/Understood, I am Satisfied (Child; Parent) | | | | |
|---|--|-------------|---|---------------|
| Overall, I feel that | PlayConnect+ Playgroup staff listened to me and understood my child ... | | | |
| | ... Not at all | | | ... Very much |
| | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 5 |
| I am ... | ... satisfied with the PlayConnect+ service for my child | | | |
| | Not at all ... | Somewhat... | | Very... |
| | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 5 |
| I am ... | ... satisfied with PlayConnect+ Playgroup as a safe and supportive space for me to be with my child and other families | | | |
| | Not at all ... | Somewhat... | | Very... |
| | | | | |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 5 |

Figure 8. Recommended wording and display proposed for collection of Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting (SCORE) data from individual families

Data Collection and Synthesis by Program Delivery Staff and Lead Agency

Across 2023-2025, State and Territory Playgroup Organisation staff collected and entered SCORE and other related participant data into DEX. Autism Queensland staff accessed aggregate data from this portal, for synthesis and inclusion in regular Activity Work Plan (AWP) reporting.

While La Trobe University researchers had supported the selection and wording/presentation of SCORE items (described above), and secured HREC approval for access to the aggregate data and further analysis/synthesis work, the decision was jointly made that this was effectively managed by Autism Queensland staff for AWP reporting. It was considered that researcher efforts would be better put toward other evaluation activities that would add value *beyond* aggregate, group-level surveys (i.e., other Options within the proposed Evaluation Plan).

Moreover, with limited available time and other resource constraints (of researchers and consortium members, alike) it was also deemed impractical for La Trobe University researchers to seek further necessary approvals to access *individual* child/family DEX/SCORE data (i.e., such as outlined in evaluation Option B).

La Trobe University researcher efforts thereby focused on Option C (Staff Interviews; reported in Section 5 below) and Option D (Direct Contact with Families; reported subsequently in Section 6 of this report).

We refer to the regular Activity Work Plan (AWP) reporting, to which each State and Territory Organisation input, with collation and synthesis by Autism Queensland as lead agency, for the SCORE data collected across the 2023-2025 period of PlayConnect+ program delivery.

5. Insights Shared by PlayConnect+ Staff

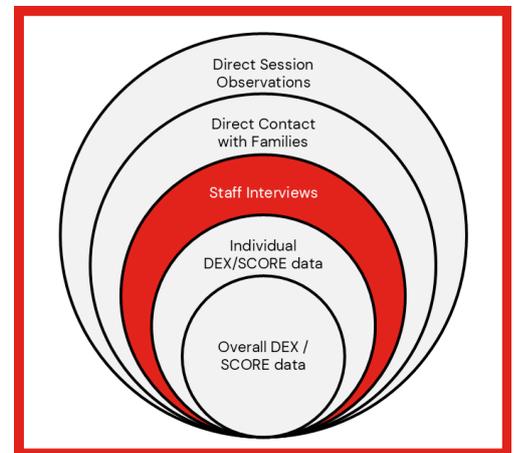
Aim of this Evaluation Component

Further to the proposed examination of program-level (i.e., Standard Client/Community Outcomes Reporting [SCORE] data), we secured La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee approval for a study related to our Evaluation Plan Option C (HEC24026; 28th Feb 2024).

Specifically, we sought to engage PlayConnect+ staff working in various roles, to share their perspectives on program operation and delivery, including on whether and how PlayConnect+ was meeting its intended outcomes for children and families.

The broad aims of our Staff Interviews, planned with initial and follow-up phases, were to gain insights into:

1. The overarching evaluation questions via systematic collection and analysis of experiences and perspectives of staff working at all levels; including the potential:
 - Converging and divergent perspectives of staff working in various roles (e.g., group Facilitators and Assistants; Program Coordinators and Managers at State- and National Lead levels, etc.); and
 - Consolidating, divergent, and/or emerging perspectives shared earlier vs. later in program delivery.
2. Family experiences reported by proxy, through staff sharing their own observations of the children and families involved in PlayConnect+ within their local group, region, or remit; including:
 - Reflecting what might be working well, and what obstacles or challenges might be present; and
 - For which parents/carers and/or children these might be the case, and why so.



First Round Interviews: Study Design and Procedure

Broad Approach

To systematically capture the diverse perspectives and experiences of PlayConnect+ staff, we undertook individual semi-structured interviews, and thereafter coded transcripts and synthesised findings across the participant group.

Development work for this study was led by the two La Trobe University research leads who maintained close communication with Autism Queensland and the Evaluation Working Group across the evaluation period, and attended Steering Committee meetings (Hudry, Aulich). Interviews with individual PlayConnect+ staff were conducted primarily by one of these same researchers (Aulich) with support from other La Trobe University researchers who had had little prior exposure to the program and organisational structure (Smith, Muniandy).

Post-interview data processing and analysis were again led by the La Trobe University researchers with the greatest knowledge of the PlayConnect+ program (Hudry, Aulich), with other members of the research team (Smith, Muniandy, Bent, Green, Pye) contributing during discussions as the analysis progressed. This ensured diverse input and a well-rounded interpretation of the interview data, as reported here.

Staff Invited to Share Insights and Steps Taken to Ensure Confidentiality

We sought a broad sample of PlayConnect+ staff, to gather a comprehensive and diverse range of perspectives, including from individuals in direct group delivery roles and in Coordination and Management roles, at regional, state, and national levels. To this end, invitation to participate in interviews was extended to all identified relevant staff:

- At Autism Queensland (AQ) as the National Lead Agency for PlayConnect+ delivery; and
- At the eight State and Territory Playgroup Organisations (and or subcontracted organisations where relevant).

Staff were initially approached in 2024, to share their experiences and insights following completion of the first year of PlayConnect+ funding (i.e., 2023 program activities). We contacted participants again for follow-up interview at one of two later timepoints, to track their evolving perspectives (detailed below).

To ensure equitable participation across all Australian States and Territories, and facilitate audio recording for subsequent transcription and analysis, staff interviews were conducted online via Zoom. Staff willing to be interviewed provided written informed consent prior to scheduling their interview. Verbal confirmation of consent to participate was checked again at the start of each interview, expected to last between 30 and 60 minutes.

Consistent with our plan for qualitative analysis of interview data—including preliminary content analysis and subsequent reflexive thematic analysis—we did not specify any particular participant sample size. Rather, our interpretation is intrinsically linked to the context of the staff who chose to participate and share their views.

We took steps to ensure staff would be able to make a voluntary, informed choice about their participation, and that information shared by individual staff members would be treated confidentially. Individual accounts have therefore been synthesised and are reported in summary for the group, with no personal identifying information shared beyond the La Trobe University research team. We have also intentionally obscured or altered some personal details, opinions and experiences reported here, to protect staff confidentiality, including editing any quotes to protect confidentiality. Quotes are also attributed to participants identified via pseudonyms (i.e., not real staff names).

Focus of Interviews with Staff in Any Role

To support staff to decide whether they would like to participate in an interview, and to help staff prepare if they did choose to be involved, we developed both a formal Participation Information and Consent Form, and an Interview Topic Guide, offering a sense of what we hoped to hear about.

Interviews began with the collection of some personal background information, including participants’ age, gender identity, racial/ethnic/socio-cultural identity and geographic location. We also asked participants about any training, formal qualifications, and/or other professional experience relevant to their role with PlayConnect+, as well as any relevant personal lived experience.

As shown in the Interview Topic guide, the focus of interview questions was then across the following:

- The nature of their involvement with PlayConnect+ and their local organisation, including:
 - Their role type/s, duration of engagement or employment, etc.; and
 - Their interactions with other staff.
- The nature of the PlayConnect+ group/s they run or have responsibility for, including for insights into:
 - Capacity and demand;
 - Program consistency and variety to meet local need;
- The numbers and characteristics of participating families, including:
 - Sharing proxy accounts of family experiences of PlayConnect+;
 - Reflecting on successes and challenges;
 - Considering whether/how the program is meeting its objectives; and
 - Perspectives on what could be different or better (for individuals, groups, regions, ...).




PlayConnect+ Evaluation: Staff Interviews
Topic Guide

We would like to hear:

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>About You and How You have Come to Your Role with PlayConnect+</p> <p>General background information about you</p> <p>Your professional and lived experience relevant to your PlayConnect+ work</p> <p>The nature of your current role/s and any previous role/s with PlayConnect+ or similar</p> | <p>About the PlayConnect+ Group/s you Run or Oversee</p> <p>How many and what types of groups Where and how often groups run</p> <p>Who attends (what types of families, parents/caregivers, children)</p> <p>What happens during sessions</p> |
| <p>About Staff Involved in Group/s you Run or Oversee</p> <p>How many and what types of staff from your own organisation</p> <p>How your organisation structures things (responsibilities, reporting lines)</p> <p>Whether and how others are involved (external organisations or individual professionals)</p> | <p>About How you Think PlayConnect+ is Going, So Far</p> <p>In terms of families who join and engage Whether/how they benefit Whether some more or less than others</p> <p>Whether any families miss out altogether</p> <p>How PlayConnect+ could work better for families (parents/caregivers, children)</p> <p>And for staff (you and your colleagues)</p> |

Findings from First-Round Interviews with 34 Staff

Summary of Staff Interviewed

First-round staff interviews were conducted from March to June 2024, by three La Trobe University researchers (Aulich, Muniandy, Smith).

Expressions of interest received from 37 staff resulted in 34 completed interviews, with representation from all States and Territories and distribution broadly consistent with size of state/territory and organisation (i.e., 1-5 staff from smaller organisations; 4-10 staff from larger organisations).

Staff participants also represented the range of:

- Metropolitan cities, and inner and outer regional areas; and
- Parts of Australia classified—according to Socio-Economic Indices for Areas ([SEIFA]; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021)—across the full range from most to least socio-economically disadvantaged.

Participating Staff also represented a range of roles with PlayConnect+, including many Group Facilitators and Assistants, and a sizeable group of Program Coordinators and Managers (working across regional-, state- and national levels). We note that, depending on organisation size and structure, a given staff member could hold more than one of these roles.

Participating staff varied widely in terms of age, from 25-to-34-year-old bracket through upward of age 55-years (with most aged from 35 to 54).

Most self-identified as Australian/Anglo-Australian or Australian with other European backgrounds. A small number of staff self-identified some other cultural/ethnic background (details withheld to protect participant confidentiality). A sizeable subset of staff indicated having been born abroad and emigrating to Australia; most (but not all) from the United Kingdom.

Participating staff described a wide range of educational backgrounds and qualifications prior to PlayConnect+ involvement, including:

- Time in in early years settings, and following formal qualification at (Certificate, Diploma, or Bachelor Degree level) in childhood, education, community services, and related disciplines
- Some individuals with formal professional qualifications, such as an allied health discipline, social work, nursing, and/or specifically disability-related qualification

Many individuals described with past experience working with children and families requiring additional support—including children with disabilities, developmental concerns, and/or trauma experiences.

Not all staff indicated the duration of their sector-relevant work experience, but for those who did, this varied markedly from just a few years'- to decades of experience.

Staff were also asked about any relevant personal/lived experience. Only a subset reported no such personal experience of disability outside of their PlayConnect+ work. The majority indicated some form of lived experience, including:

- As a parent-, or extended family member of person with a disability (including likely- or diagnosed neurodevelopmental condition, genetic syndromes, or chronic health condition); or
- Through own personal experience of disability or neurodiversity.

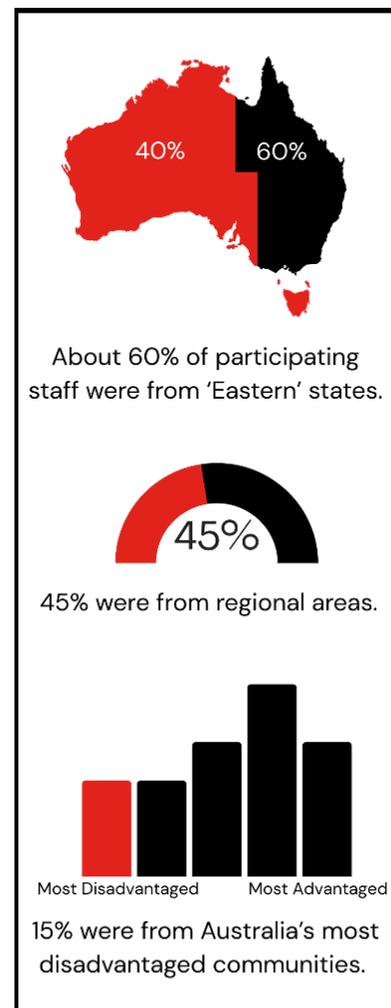


Figure 9. Snapshot of staff who participated in first round interviews

Early Insights Shared by Staff in Various Roles

Staff interview transcripts were initially coded and analysed with a view to addressing the overarching evaluation questions and reporting against Activity Work Planning (AWP; i.e., in January-June 2024 reporting period).

A more thorough, inductive approach was subsequently taken, seeking to identify themes arising in the interview data (i.e., new insights in the accounts shared by staff, beyond simply seeking answers to set evaluation questions).

Coding was led by one La Trobe University Researcher (Aulich) and themes developed in discussion with another (Hudry). Both shared their impressions and preliminary interpretations with the broader La Trobe University research team. The experiences shared by 34 PlayConnect+ Staff working in various roles converged around three themes each with several subthemes:

- Who PlayConnect+ Serves,
- How PlayConnect+ Works, and
- Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+.

These themes identified from the insights shared by staff, are summarised in the following thematic map, and described in detail below with illustrative quotes (attributed to pseudonyms and possibly edited to protect staff confidentiality by obscuring potentially identifying information).

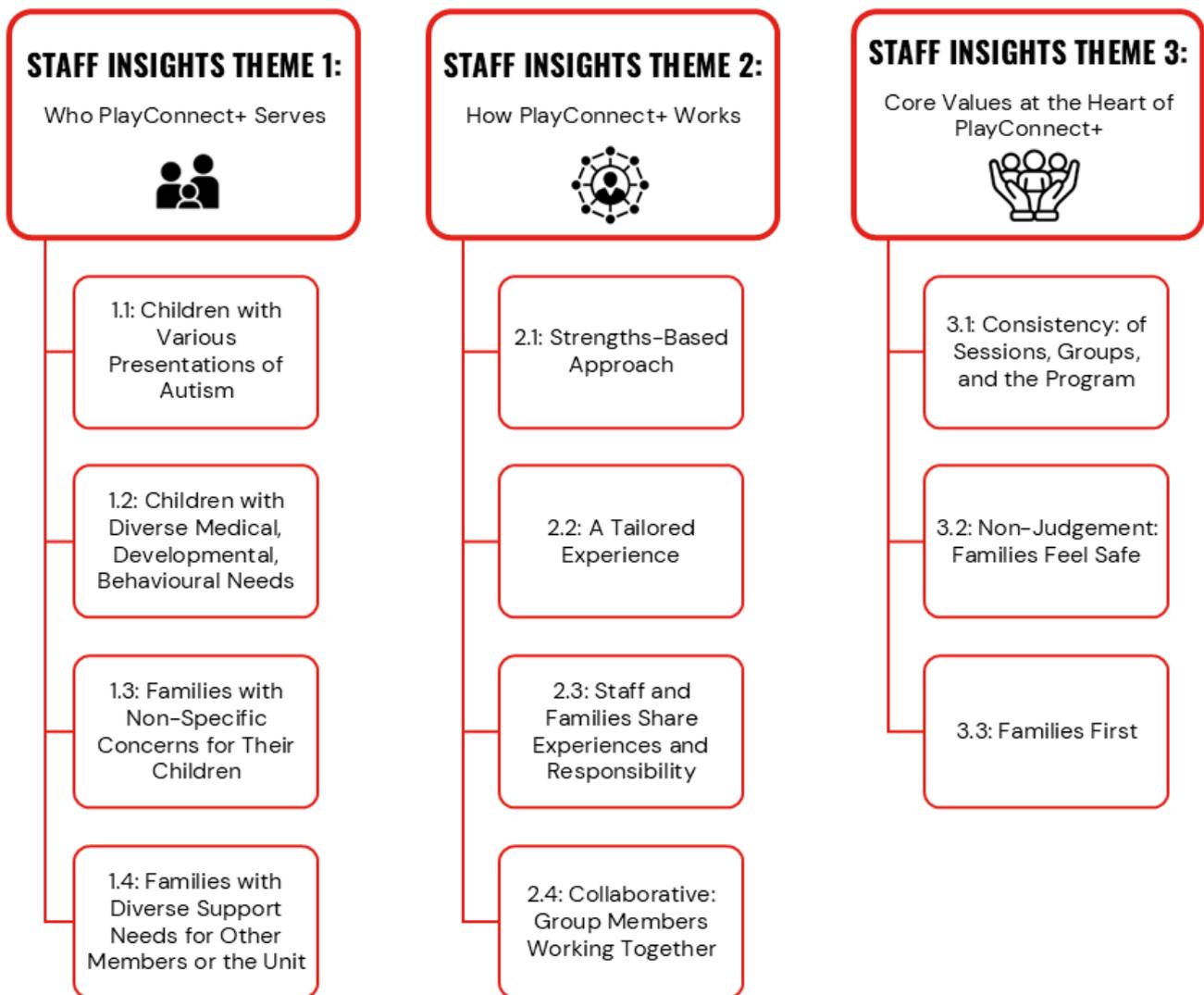


Figure 10. Summary thematic map of insights shared by 34 staff who participated in first round interviews

 **STAFF INSIGHTS THEME 1: Who PlayConnect+ Serves**

Staff accounts shared in early-to-mid 2024 suggested PlayConnect+ was effectively engaging the National Early childhood Program (NECP) target groups, thereby offering universal access—no ‘wrong door’—for children, parents/carers, and families with a range of support needs.

“We’ve got a few children with a diagnosis of ASD at varying levels... a couple who are completely non-verbal” [Harriet] and “some [with] really challenging behaviours and needs” [Miho]

Staff descriptions included substantial emphasis on **Children with Various Presentations of Autism** (Subtheme 1.1), including presentations ranging from those already assessed as being at ‘ASD Level 3’ (i.e., very high support needs)—“We’ve got a few children with a diagnosis of ASD at varying levels... a couple who are completely non-verbal” [Harriet]—to children with possible autism—“The bulk of [children]... autism is going to be [the] diagnosis they get... I would be surprised if that wasn’t the outcome” [Marion]. In some families, parents/carers were not ready to talk about autism—“Sometimes we have families that come to us and say ‘oh no’ [when a possible diagnosis is raised]... We let them decide when they want to start that journey... it’s not up to us to say, ‘Your child’s got this, this and this...’” [Sonja]—but attending/engaging well.

Staff also described participation from **Children with Diverse Medical, Developmental, and Behavioural Needs** (Subtheme 1.2)—“We’ve had one little boy with cerebral palsy” [Valerie], and “Families are coming through with perhaps chromosomal conditions... other medical conditions... or more apparent physical limitations/disabilities that happen from birth” [Eliza]. Examples of those with developmental learning needs included “ASD, ADHD, speech delay... they’ve been the consistent sorts of [presentations]” [Valerie], and “The diversity within the group really is mainly [around] diagnosis of global developmental delay, [or] awaiting an assessment for autism, [or] ADHD...” [Jeannette]. Moreover, staff described common externalising (i.e., ‘acting out’) and internalising (e.g., anxiety) behavioural presentations in participating children, some linked to diagnosed developmental conditions—“We have lots of children with Level 3 Autism, and some really challenging behaviours and needs” [Miho]—and others, as consequence of trauma history—“A lot of families are getting referred to us because their children have challenging behaviours... find it difficult to socialise... and seems the underlying [reason] is developmental trauma” [Tae].

“A lot of families are getting referred to us because their children have challenging behaviours... find it difficult to socialise... and seems the underlying [reason] is developmental trauma” [Tae]

Some staff shared examples of engaged **Families with Non-Specific Concerns for Their Children** (Subtheme 1.3). This included those with non-concrete concerns for their children—“We have some families who are unsure about their child’s development... might be pretty sure there’s something [different] going on... might be wondering, so they’re coming along” [Christie], and “Some families will come to [PlayConnect+] because they’ve got a concern, and nothing [official] has happened yet... they know there’s something, but they need... reassurance and support” [Olive]. There were other parents/caregivers who did have concerns about their child but had been told that it’s a parenting issue by other professionals—“[Parents have] gone to their paediatrician... they’ve been fobbed off... more or less told it’s a ‘parenting concern’” [Eliza].

“Some families will come to [PlayConnect+] because they’ve got a concern, and nothing [official] has happened yet... they know there’s something, but they need... reassurance and support” [Olive]

Staff described PlayConnect+ as an inclusive and non-judgemental space for those **with Diverse Support Needs for Other Family Members or the Unit** (Subtheme 1.4). This included priority target groups—families with parent/carer disability, or physical or mental illness, and those experiencing adversity, such as through homelessness, food insecurity, low socio-economic circumstances, etc.

“I’ve had a foster carer come with two babies both with quite significant disability... [one with] global developmental delay, and other awaiting diagnosis. The youngest only a really, really young baby... not meeting [developmental milestones] and, I would imagine, with foetal alcohol syndrome” [Vicki].

“Every box you can tick... from low socio-economic [circumstances]... Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families... Culturally and Linguistically Diverse families... [families experiencing] domestic and family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, food insecurity... [communities with] much higher rates of crime than national averages. A lot of the intergenerational complex experiences of life [are captured amongst PlayConnect+ families]” [Christie].

"...in the last two to three years we're getting far more Culturally and Linguistically Diverse clientele through [PlayConnect+]" [Eliza]

Indeed, some staff described scenarios of children attending in alternative care arrangements (e.g., living with extended family or foster care)—“Grandparents are bringing their [grand]children.”, “a set of foster parents...” [Pam] and “...a family that was involved with the [Justice Department]...” [Jay] also attend various Playgroups. Staff also described participation by families from government priority groups including “...a higher number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families [attending]” [Christie] and “...in the last two to three years... far more Culturally and Linguistically Diverse [families]” [Eliza].



STAFF INSIGHTS THEME 2: How PlayConnect+ Works

PlayConnect+ Staff described a **Strengths-Based Approach** (Subtheme 2.1), where facilitators and assistants sought to engage with families based each child’s interests and needs, as integral to program success—“Creating those relationships with the children, and [PlayConnect+] is specific to their interests [and] what the parents want to see... we take that all into account” [Courtney]. Relatedly, staff described using children’s interests to create opportunities for them to try new things or to practice—“Quite often, if a [child’s allied health professional] suggests something, we’ll introduce that through our programme too, because it’s going to benefit all of the kids” [Jincai]. Ultimately, staff described striving to build children’s motivation to participate over time—“I can see the children are gradually becoming more and more comfortable coming [to PlayConnect+]... gradually participating more and more” [Yuliang], and “The children themselves have really come out of their shells and are participating much more now in group routines” [Jincai].

"The children themselves have really come out of their shells and are participating much more now in group routines" [Jincai]

"We're always having open, transparent conversations with families about where they might fill gaps ...where there might be things with waitlists and what they could do while they're waiting... and just supporting families in that way" [Carolina]

“We’re always having open, transparent conversations with families about where they might fill gaps... where there might be things with waitlists and what they could do while they’re waiting... and just supporting families in that way” [Carolina]. Staff also described building parent/carer capacity to seek services and advocate for their children, and occasionally engaging services directly on a family’s behalf—“We’re all about capacity building and supporting families. But there comes a time where I might say ‘Look, if you’re happy and give me consent, I’m more than happy to pick up the phone and make a phone call’ and advocate on their behalf” [Carolina].

Relatedly, staff described how PlayConnect+ success comes from offering **A Tailored Experience** (Subtheme 2.2), meeting the identified needs of every child, parent/carer, and family unit—“So the first session is usually information gathering, about the child’s special interests” [Jeannette]. Facilitators and Assistants described making an effort to really get to know their PlayConnect+ families. This included having open conversations with parents/carers about their children and family needs, to understand what community connections and referrals might be useful—“We start conversations with families, and by building the relationship, we find out what might be missing for them in regard to services... [and then] we give them an understanding of what they can receive from service [options]” [Melinda] and

"We're all about capacity building and supporting families. But there comes a time when I might say 'Look, if you're happy and give me consent, I'm more than happy to pick up the phone and make a phone call' and advocate on their behalf" [Carolina]

Staff also described seeking to create tailored within-session structure, where expectations were clear, but participation was optional. This was depicted as an effective way to encourage child and adult participation, whilst maintaining non-judgemental, safe space—“The programme runs as a very flexible routine. I have a visual board, which shows the routine, but no timings or anything... just sort of Arrival, Inside Play... let

"The programme runs as a very flexible routine" [Harriet]; "It's very, very flexible" [Olive]

[children and families] have freedom so there’s no ‘You need to sit down and do this activity now’. It’s just freedom of inside play where the experiences are set up” [Harriet] and “It’s very, very flexible. If we have a child who seems to be struggling to regulate and they need some [decompression], we’ll get some cushions out... give them some squishy [toys]... whatever” [Olive].

PlayConnect+ staff described a shared journey with **Staff and Families Sharing Experiences and Responsibility** (Subtheme 2.3). Staff shared the families' emotional journeys, recognising the negatives and challenges, but also celebrating in the positives of children's successes—"I love nothing better than to work with a family [who might have been] scarred at the start... and then see how far they've come in their journey. It's a real privilege to be able to guide them along that journey. There will be hiccups along the way, but it's beautiful to see that child at the end of the journey, how far they've come" [Claudine] and "[Mum and I] comment to one another other when [child's] done something he hasn't done before, or just engaged in one activity for a longer period of time, or [achievements] like that" [Yuliang]. Staff described close working partnerships with parents/carers—from understanding a child's individual interests and needs, to creating opportunities for children to try new things or practice their skills—"We always ask families 'Let us know what other skills you're working on in therapy sessions, so this can be another environment for your child to practice those skills'. Because therapy is likely one-on-one, and [PlayConnect+ is an opportunity for] children to practice in a different environment, with other children and people" [Benita]. Staff equally described supporting parents/carers to further their own skills—"PlayConnect+ is] actually really about upskilling parents to be able to support their child's development" [Christie]. Critically, staff described their efforts to empower parents, as opposed to taking full responsibility for children—"We try to do as much as possible that will be transferrable. So, [thinking about] the skill or the fun or delight that a parent is having with their child, or that a child might be having by themselves [and how] parents can [recreate] similar things at home" [Courtney].

"It's beautiful to see that child at the end of the journey, how far they've come" [Carolina]

"[PlayConnect+ is] actually really about upskilling parents to be able to support their child's development" [Christie]

Relatedly, staff described PlayConnect+ as inherently **Collaborative: Group Members Working Together** (Subtheme 2.4). This included accounts of how other professionals were involved in effectively supporting children and families—"We've been able to have the [local] school occupational therapist, speech therapist and physiotherapist come [to PlayConnect+] as guest speakers" [Benita] and "We get our [local] National Disability Insurance Agency provider, or the Child Development team to come out" [Sonja]. Moreover, staff conveyed how they worked closely with more 'established families' in their PlayConnect+ groups to support the engagement of 'newer families'—"We have our core regular families that come. Anyone new that comes, it's really refreshing to sit back and watch them [our regular families] introduce themselves... be so inclusive..." [Marion]. Staff described family-to-family support, such as sharing local advice about specific providers or advocacy strategies. Together, staff and families work to build awareness in the group of national services and platforms (e.g., Raising Children Network [RCN] and Envisage) and local providers (e.g., educators, health professionals, local disability support agencies, etc.). This includes inviting local providers to PlayConnect+ group sessions to connect them with families, speak to the group on a given topic, or to support families' community connections (e.g., to understand NDIS plans, etc). Staff have also made efforts to connect directly with and enable connection between parents/carers—"I think the connection... it happens between families... the peer support that starts to take place is really relevant for families. They share information, organise play dates..." [Marion] and "It's getting those relationships, those supports, whether just informal... being able say to someone 'Here is what's happening. What are your ideas?'" [Meredith].

"I think the connection... it happens between families... the peer support that starts to take place is really relevant for families. They share information, organise play dates..." [Marion]

 **STAFF INSIGHTS THEME 3: Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+**

Ultimately, Staff working in various roles across all States and Territories conveyed a set of core values underscoring PlayConnect+; factors linked to but abstracted from contractual obligations and session activity plans.

The first Core Value reflected **Consistency: of Sessions, Groups, and the Program** (Subtheme 3.1). Staff described session-level consistency in terms of activities and materials, and cross-session structure and routines; both key to child and family participation—"We have a great deal of consistency, and I'm really happy with that. Because it builds social skills within the kids and capacity

"We have a great deal of consistency, and I'm really happy with that. Because it builds social skills within the kids and capacity in their parents" [Eliza]

in their parents” [Eliza]. Consistency in terms of group availability was also reflected at the group/regional level, where once established, a PlayConnect+ playgroup would be sustained. This consistency was described as critical to building family trust in the program and the staff, and was particularly true for vulnerable families or those who might be at risk of isolation from family, community, and/or other services—“What is so important... is us being consistent... offering the opportunity consistently. So families can build trust that when they’re in the position that they’re ready to access us, we’re there” [Christie] and “We’re a small team... but that provides continuity and consistency... [parents] know PlayConnect+ offers continuity, that they’re with someone who understands their child and is patient” [Sonja]. Consistency was also advocated at higher level; the need for consistent availability week-on-week, term-on-term, and year-on-year, with critical need for a multi-year funding model, including sufficient notice of secured funding terms and thought with respect to school-/calendar- vs. financial year of funding cycles—“Having been involved in community programmes for a long time, the rollout of this one was quite clunky. The goalposts changed a lot early on [which] made it difficult to plan, and stay on [track]” [Courtney] and “Obviously, we have to keep our funder happy and meet their expectations. So, we run one two-hour session every week, then holiday programmes across our sites... that’s the expectation” [Olive].

The second core value of **Non-Judgement: Families Feel Safe** (Subtheme 3.2), was again expressed at multiple levels for PlayConnect+. At one level was the sentiment that ‘all are welcome’, including any child (target children, and siblings, cousins, etc.) and any parent/carer (including, respite workers, foster/alternative carers, etc.)—“There’s no judgement within [PlayConnect+] groups... and I think that’s what a lot of families find great” [Eliza] and “Probably for the first time ever in this family’s life, they can go [somewhere] their child isn’t judged for being a bit different to other kids” [Marion]. Moreover, PlayConnect+ was described as a setting where families could feel safe and attend in whatever state they might be, on a given day—“You come when you can come. And if you’re running late, just come. With no shoes on... haven’t eaten breakfast... it’s all right, we’ll get you something” [Estelle] and “Most of our families will come for the full two hours, but some will just pop in... because they’ve been to therapy and only have an hour to spare” [Courtney]. The sentiment of non-judgement extended further, conveying clearly that children and their families could and should feel free to ‘be’ themselves. Staff conveyed clearly that PlayConnect+ groups had no particular expectation of conformity; that non-normative ‘atypical’ behaviour (e.g., sensory sensitivity) was readily accommodated, and that challenging behaviour could be supported or appropriately managed—“[Parents] understand it’s so different from mainstream playgroup [where] they often feel judged... their child is accepted... [if] having a meltdown or sensory overload, it doesn’t matter, no one’s judging them. And everyone looks out for one another” [Olive].

“There’s no judgement within [PlayConnect+] groups... and I think that’s what a lot of the families find great” [Eliza]

“Probably, for the first time ever in this family’s life, they can go [somewhere] their child isn’t judged for being a bit different to other kids” [Marion]

The third core value of PlayConnect+ staff conveyed was a clear sense of **Families First** (Subtheme 3.3). Staff described ways in which they made adjustments, working with and around policy where appropriate, to secure family attendance and ensure a positive participation experience for children and their parents/carers—“Even though we don’t have that consistency of [families] attending, [it’s important we are] consistent and offering the opportunity [of a local PlayConnect+ group] consistently. So that families can build trust... when they’re ready to access us, we’re there” [Christie] and “Our biggest [effort] is making sure families know that we’re there... we let families know we’d love them to come consistently... but we’re very accepting that life gets in the way... sometimes you just can’t attend regularly... and please attend when you can, rather than feel you can’t [attend at all]” [Courtney]. Staff conveyed a strong sense of commitment to the safety and security of their families, ensuring their rights, dignity and confidentiality were secure. Staff also had a careful eye to balancing quality and quantity within program delivery, including recognising the potential competing demands of contractual obligation and practical implications of features such as group size and location—“We keep our group small, [based on] feedback from parents over the years and watching the dynamics within the room. [With] parents, carers, grandparents or siblings [all welcome], you can end up with quite a large group... and that’s not always a good thing. It doesn’t work for everybody” [Eliza] and “We have... a smaller group. And I’ve had to make it [so] because we have some [children with] challenging behaviours in there” [Claudine].

“Families can build trust... when they’re ready to access us, we’re there” [Christie]

“We keep our group [small, based on] feedback from parents over the years and watching the dynamics within the room... a large group [is] not always a good thing. It doesn’t work for everybody” [Eliza]

“We keep our group [small, based on] feedback from parents over the years and watching the dynamics within the room... a large group [is] not always a good thing. It doesn’t work for everybody” [Eliza]

Procedure for Follow-Up Staff Interviews

Following first-round interviews, we recontacted staff for follow-up interview at one of two timepoints:

- **Group Facilitators and Assistants:** Near the end of 2024 (i.e., same calendar year as initial interview); and
- **Program Coordinators and Managers:** In mid-2025, toward the end of the original NECP funding period.

While we sought primarily to reconnect with staff we had already spoken to, we took a pragmatic approach and interviewed any PlayConnect+ staff willing to speak with us at this time even if not previously interviewed.

Focus and Findings from Follow-Up with 21 Facilitators/Assistants

Focus of Follow-up with Facilitators and Assistants

The focus of follow-up interviews with Facilitators and Assistants was to share the summary of our analysis of first-round interviews—seeking feedback, further reflections, and any points of clarification on our findings—and to hear more about topics we felt we had not adequately covered in earlier interviews:

- Asking about how well Facilitators and Assistants felt things were working, for specific families, their group/s, and themselves in their role/s; and
- Reviewing programmatic and organisational decision-making—including clarifying how features summarised elsewhere might have come to be.

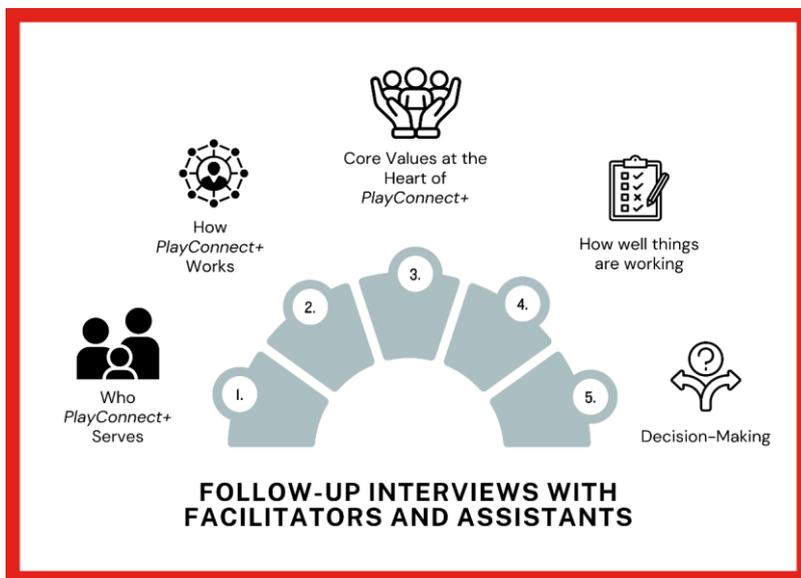


Figure 11. Summary follow-up interview topics for Facilitators and Assistants

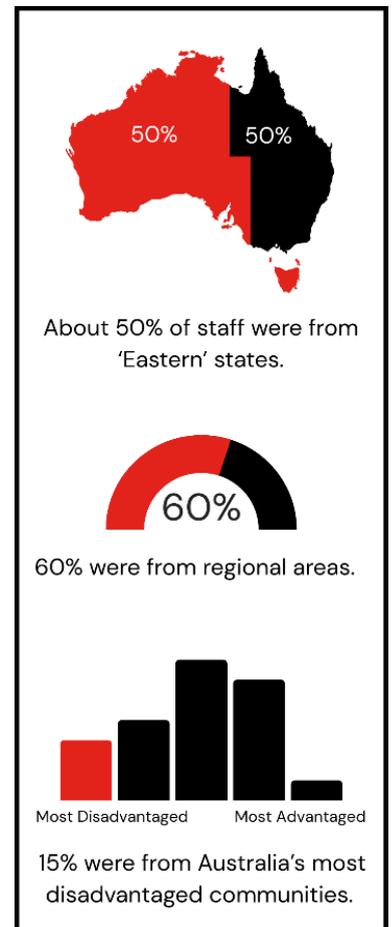


Figure 12. Snapshot of Facilitators/ Assistants interviewed at follow-up

Summary of Staff Interviewed

Follow-up interviews in November and December 2024 were conducted by the same three La Trobe University researchers (Aulich, Muniandy, Smith), with 19 returning and 2 additional Facilitators and Assistants who expressed interest in participating here. At this timepoint, there was representation from most, but not all, States and Territories. Compared to the first-round interview participant group, at follow-up there was somewhat greater representation from staff outside of the East-coast States/Territories and based in regional areas. Again, according to Socio-Economic Indices for Areas (SEIFA; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021), staff we spoke to at follow-up were from parts of Australia classified across the full range from most to least socio-economically disadvantaged.

Most staff attending these late 2024 follow-up interviews identified themselves as PlayConnect+ Facilitators, but there was some representation from staff in Assistant roles, and from some staff working across both group Facilitator and Program Coordinator roles.

Reflections and Additional Insights Shared by Facilitators

Again, staff interview transcripts were coded by one La Trobe University researcher (Aulich) with themes reviewed and further developed inductively, in discussion primarily with one other researcher (Hudry). Unlike the earlier analysis phase, however, the goal here was not to begin analysis anew, but rather to *refine* the original thematic map, with revisions also discussed among members of the broader research team.

Analysis of follow-up, reflective interview with the 19 returning and 2 new PlayConnect+ Facilitators and Assistants, retained our original three key Themes, but with the addition of two new subthemes, and clarification of a third. The final thematic map of insights shared by staff in many roles, and specifically reviewed by Facilitators and Assistants, is summarised in the figure, with key points described in detail with additional illustrative quotes provided (attributed to pseudonyms and potentially edited to protect staff confidentiality).

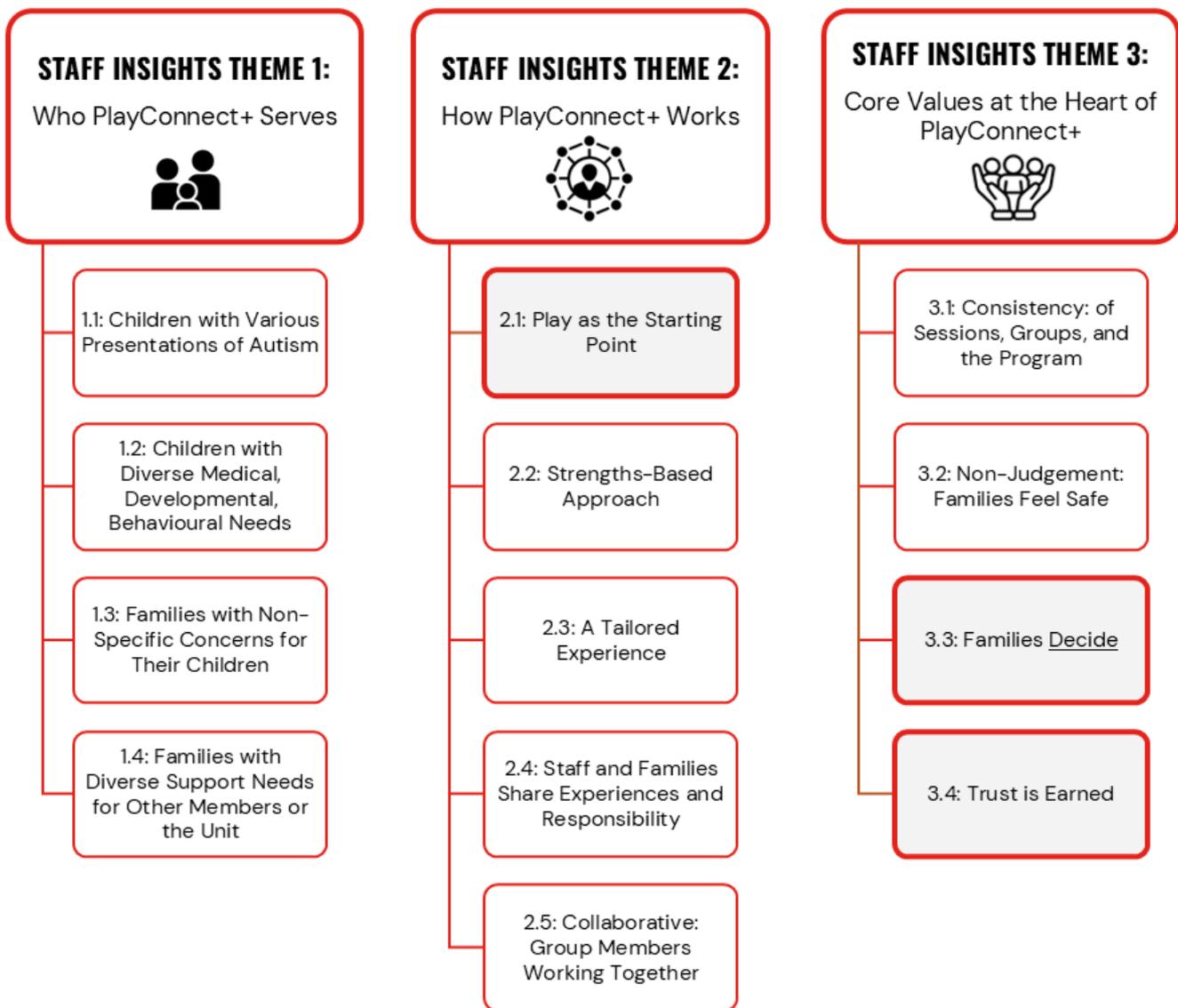


Figure 13. Summary thematic map of insights first shared by staff in a range of roles, and the revised following further reflection by Facilitators and Assistants who participated in follow-up interviews.



ELABORATION ON STAFF INSIGHTS THEME 1: Who PlayConnect+ Serves

Facilitators/Assistants broadly agreed with our presentation *On Who PlayConnect+ Serves*, but offered some elaboration. Within Subtheme 1.2, these staff also reflected that participating **Children with Diverse Medical, Developmental and Behavioural Needs** included children with anxiety/internalising behaviours who presented a particular set of needs, and associated challenges for engaging families. Facilitators/Assistants described how families with anxious children may potentially stand to really benefit from PlayConnect+ playgroups; for instance: *"We're trying to really sell ourselves as a very intimate, small, calming, supportive space for children... And we've noticed of late, some of our children have slowly gotten closer... actually playing and taking turns together. That probably wouldn't happen in a larger group, whether a supported or community space... very busy and overwhelming"* [Sonja]. Yet they also described that families with anxious children may not realise

PlayConnect+ is—or could be—an appropriately supportive environment for them, particularly if language used to describe the program seems to emphasise other support needs. Some Facilitators/Assistants were concerned that families with children with internalising difficulties may be actively 'put off' attending PlayConnect+ by descriptions of other child circumstances—diagnosed developmental or medical/health conditions—that may not make the program seem an intuitive fit: *"Some families aren't going to relate [to descriptions of PlayConnect+], or [will think] 'Well, that's not for me'. But actually, [childhood] anxiety is significant, and... PlayConnect+ is for anybody who doesn't feel comfortable in a mainstream playgroup. But how do [we] communicate that... the language around [PlayConnect+]?"* [Jeannette].

Relatedly, and on Subtheme 1.3—concerning **Families with Non-Specific Concerns for Their Children**—Facilitators/Assistants elaborated the context of families presenting to PlayConnect+ after having tried other community playgroups and found these to be a poor fit for their child's needs. Again, they explained this could be due to internalising behaviours (e.g., anxiety). But they also described how this could be due to children presenting externalising or 'big behaviours' which might mean families were poorly-received at community playgroups, leading them to seek out more inclusive options—*"...with PlayConnect+... if a child is having a meltdown, the other parents aren't judging [that child or parent], and I think that's the difference... the [non-judgement side of it all]"* [Sienna], and *"I think the point of distinction is that [parents] won't get judgement... and not just from us as staff, but from our other families either..."* [Marion]. With its core value of non-judgement, PlayConnect+ was also described as a potentially 'safer space' than community playgroups where parents/carers were experiencing anxiety or depression, and offered examples of some such families joining and benefiting—*"When a family is having a hard time or [experiencing] big emotions, [we] say to them, 'We're here to learn together, and it's okay to have these moments'. We make sure they know it's okay... If they want to have a cry, we're here... Or they want to take a little break... we say, 'We know it's hard, and it's okay [to be emotional].'"* [Melinda]. While Facilitators/Assistants felt PlayConnect+ could be a strong fit for parents/carers with their own internalising conditions, again they described feeling the program may not seem this way to such families at first impression (vs. being clearly targeted to families with children with medical or developmental needs, or neurodivergence).

As a final point of elaboration on Who PlayConnect+ Serves, Facilitators and Assistants reflected further on the program supporting **Families with Diverse Support Needs for Other Members or the Family Unit** (Subtheme 1.4), here emphasising relevance for families with parents/carers with their own neurodivergence experiences—*"We've got so many parents, especially mums, that are ADHD[ers] and on the [Autism] Spectrum"* [Olive].

"We're trying to really sell ourselves as a very intimate, small, calming, supportive space for children... playing and taking turns together... probably wouldn't happen in a larger... busy and overwhelming [group]" [Sonja]

"[Childhood] anxiety is significant, and... PlayConnect+ is for anybody who doesn't feel comfortable in a mainstream playgroup... how do [we] communicate that?" [Jeannette]

"When a family is having a hard time... [we] say... 'We're here to learn together, and it's okay to have these moments'. We make sure they know it's okay... If they want to have a cry, we're here... Or they want to take a little break... we say, 'We know it's hard, and it's okay [to be emotional].'" [Melinda]

"We've got so many parents, especially mums, that are ADHD[ers] and on the [Autism] Spectrum" [Olive]

 **ELABORATION ON STAFF INSIGHTS THEME 2: How PlayConnect+ Works**

Facilitators/Assistants also broadly agreed with our synthesis on *How PlayConnect+ Works*, elaborating on three of our four initial sub-themes and highlighting a new feature—**Play as the Starting Point** (now Subtheme 2.1). We heard staff describe play as critical to PlayConnect+ success—an ‘in’ for families to come and simply play, without pressure to achieve any particular outcome—“...families [attend] a lot of therapy sessions... what their child needs. But sometimes [parents] forget to just relax and play with their child. That’s what we try and encourage... to have a nice, enjoyable morning together” [Benita]. Play sets a base from which other core values and program features are built—including completing paperwork,

“... sometimes [parents] forget to just relax and play with their child... we try and encourage... to have a nice, enjoyable morning together” [Benita]

teaching new skills, building connection and making referrals. Staff emphasised how none of these objectives of PlayConnect+ would or could be met, without play as the gateway to families feeling safe and successful, building trust and connection—“You [can] explain to [parents] all the skills [children] learn through play... their whole world doesn’t have to be therapy... being involved in [playgroups] and playing [together] at home, they’re learning... [and] it’s fun... doesn’t have to be intense” [Eliza].

“... being involved in [playgroups] and playing [together] at home, they’re learning... [and] it’s fun... doesn’t have to be intense” [Eliza]

We have links to community... schools and kindergartens... we know which are actually small... where most of the [kids in our community] with additional needs go. We have good relationships... to get [families where] they need to be” [Marion]

Regarding PlayConnect+ offering **A Tailored Experience** (Subtheme 2.3)—from first engagement and then ongoingly—staff reflected on considering also it might be time for families to move on from PlayConnect+—“We have links to community... schools and kindergartens... we know which are actually small... don’t have [multiple connected] play spaces. We know the ones where most of the [kids in our community] with additional needs go. We have good relationships... to get [families] off [generic waitlists] and into the [particular, known places] that they need to be” [Marion]. This included considering when and how some families might be supported to transition back to community playgroups once they had built skills and confidence through PlayConnect+, as a more sustainable option and to free up PlayConnect+ capacity for new families.

In reflecting on **Staff and Families Sharing Experiences and Responsibility** (Subtheme 2.4), staff expanded on the perceived contribution of their own lived experience, whether as parent—“I have a [teenager] with autism [and] being able to speak to that, I think, makes me relatable [to families]” [Eliza]—or given their own neurodivergence—

“... the children’s stuff [support needs]... we’ve got our heads around that. [But] the adult stuff is a lot” [Jincai]

“I’m Autistic and have ADHD, and I talk about myself and my children [which sometimes] helps me connect with [new] families...” [Jeannette]

“I’m Autistic and have ADHD, and I talk about myself and my children [which sometimes] helps me connect with [new] families, and then they’ll come in to PlayConnect+” [Jeannette]. While staff felt their professional and personal lived experience enabled them to effectively support children, however, they expressed surprise at the substantial support needs of parents/carers—something they wished to be able to meet in their roles, but felt less prepared for—“...more challenging than a lot of the children’s stuff... we’ve got our heads around that. [But] the adult stuff is a lot” [Jincai].

Finally on the mechanism of PlayConnect+ as inherently **Collaborative: Group Members Working Together** (Subtheme 2.5), Facilitators/Assistants expanded this point to give clear examples of how they supported one another within their small staff teams, to solve problems relevant to their groups and families. This included reflecting on the unanticipated arising support needs of parents/carers (as noted above), where staff felt they benefitted immensely from the opportunity to work together, before and after sessions—“With my Assistant, we drive to the PlayConnect+ playgroup together. So we have time to chat about the families... what we think could be helpful. And then... on the way back... we can debrief about it all” [Terri].

“With my Assistant, we drive to the PlayConnect+ playgroup together. So we have time to chat about the families... what we think could be helpful. And then... on the way back... we can debrief about it all” [Terri]



ELABORATION ON STAFF INSIGHTS THEME 3: Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+

Feedback from Facilitators and Assistants suggested our initial analysis had effectively captured *Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+*. Staff elaboration on all three preliminary sub-themes we had identified, but their additional comments also suggested a fourth core value not previously captured (outlined below; Subtheme 3.4).

"When I get a new family... I'll give them a call beforehand [to] chat about any concerns... reassure them it's a safe place... there's no judgement" [Terri]

On the core value of **Consistency: of Sessions, Groups, and the Program** (Subtheme 3.1), staff further emphasised the need for consistency of contact with families, including working outside of sessions to achieve this, if needed. The core value (Subtheme 3.2) **Non-Judgement: Families Feel Safe** had also been expressed at multiple levels beginning with the sentiment 'all welcome', Facilitators/Assistants clarified here that this was about all families being welcome, and welcome to attend and play—simply play, with no particular demands or outcomes (see above). Moreover, staff now more explicitly described a counterpoint—that they and their group took care to consider when, why and how they might extend invitation to professionals to visit the group (see below),

to ensure PlayConnect+ remained first and foremost a place where families felt safe. Staff also emphasised how felt safety was something they worked to establish quickly for new parents/carers—*"When I get a new family coming, I'll give them a call beforehand [to] chat about any concerns they have and reassure them that it's a safe place... there's no judgement" [Terri], and "[My] rule... as soon as a new family comes... we make it very clear, every child and every parent here... is learning... has challenges... we're a non-judgemental zone" [Tae].*

"[My] rule... as soon as a new family comes... we make it very clear, every child and every parent here... is learning... has challenges... we're a non-judgemental zone" [Tae]

"[building] that relationship, so they're comfortable enough to talk to [us]... [we might want to] prompt 'What's been going on?'... but we can't do that until they trust us..." [Jincai]

Relatedly, staff clarified the subtheme we had labelled **Families First**, to highlight the equal or greater power given to families, above staff, to determine the direction and activities of the group—now relabelled **Families Decide** (Subtheme 3.3). That is, Facilitators/Assistants described empowering individuals to make decisions for themselves (at any given session and over time with PlayConnect+) and family groups to make collective decisions. Staff shared this as an intention, but also a practical reality—that if they made decisions separately, families might opt out at best, or even disengage altogether—*"[Guest] speaker choice] needs to be led by [parents]... ask them outright, not just plop [in] a guest..." [Eliza].* Again, staff described how *Families Decide* at all levels—from beginning with Play (see above), to allowing how and when parents might begin to talk about their child's needs—*"[building] that relationship, so they're*

comfortable enough to talk to [us]... if Mum's looking worse for wear, [we might want to] prompt 'What's been going on?'... but we can't do that until they trust us... that we will treat [what they say] confidentially... be supportive and non-judgemental" [Jincai]. Relatedly, staff described their efforts to balance family empowerment with service delivery and reporting requirements, seeking to follow guidelines and policy whilst respecting family autonomy, and acknowledging that pushing families to do something would only undermine other efforts toward PlayConnect+ being a collaborative and safe space, and earn and maintain family trust.

Indeed, the notion **Trust is Earned** (Subtheme 3.4) was conveyed as a clear additional Core Value of PlayConnect+ in these follow-up interviews. Facilitators and Assistants described the critical trust they developed together within their small staffing teams, and with the individual children and parents/carers in their groups, for the benefit of individuals and the group—*"We're all doing it together... [we're] a team, I suppose, or a family" [Toni].* They were clear trust needed to be very deliberately built, and prioritised before seeking to offer families informational or other supports—*"... [first] we might post [information about] a workshop [in our] a closed online group... [better than directly saying] to a family... 'This would be really beneficial [for you] when we haven't built trust [yet]'" [Rachel].* Relatedly, staff described presenting Ground Rules for their groups—*"I have an [information] sheet 'Getting the Most out of PlayConnect+'... [how to] get the most out of [sessions] and what might happen... like, 'Some days will be busier than others... It's okay to step out if you're overwhelmed, or leave early'" [Eliza]*—as a way to quickly build trust with new families through conveying shared expectations and values.

"We're all doing it together... [we're] a team, I suppose, or a family" [Toni]

Focus and Findings from Follow up with 7 Managers/Coordinators

Focus of Follow up with Coordinators and Managers

The focus of follow-up interviews with program Coordinators and Managers was similar—to share our first-round interview analysis, but also to hear more from these staff uniquely positioned to reflect on strategic program objectives and outcomes to date, and potential future directions (given the announced additional 2-year funding). Additional topics here were:

- On patterns of family interest and engagement;
- Any specific needs or considerations for a given state, region or other remit of responsibility; and
- Considerations on the policy and funding environment, and future service delivery and evaluation priorities.

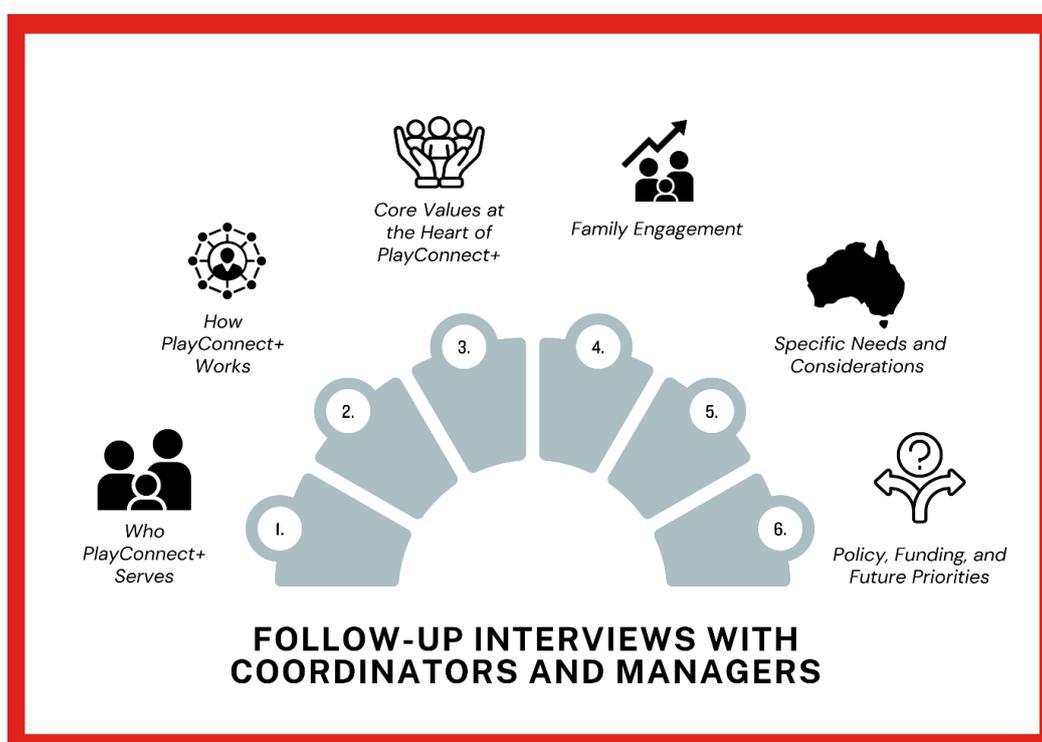


Figure 14. Summary follow-up interview topics for Coordinators/Managers

Summary of Staff Interviewed

Follow-up interviews with PlayConnect+ Program Coordinators and Managers in May 2025 were all conducted by one La Trobe University researcher (Pye) who spoke with 7 staff from 5 States/Territories. All were based in Major Cities of Australia, but where Socio-Economic Indices for Areas ([SEIFA]; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021) nevertheless indicated representation parts of Australia ranging from moderate through least socio-economic disadvantage. Most of the staff participating in this second round had also been interviewed one year earlier. Some reported holding joint roles (e.g., also working as a PlayConnect+ Group Facilitator).

Reflections and Additional Insights Shared by Program Coordinators and Managers

Transcripts for this small set of interviews were coded by one La Trobe University researcher (Aulich) with codes and themes reviewed and further developed in discussion primarily with two other researchers (Pye, Hudry). Again, the goal here was not to begin analysis anew; rather, to *refine* and/or expand on the original thematic map with further insights from this particular staff subgroup toward the end of the original NECP funding period, and to seek insights on the three additional topics identified as particularly relevant for this group at this point in time. The key points are described in detail with additional illustrative quotes provided (with no names or pseudonyms used here, to protect the confidentiality of staff members in this relatively small subgroup holding senior roles).



ELABORATION ON STAFF INSIGHTS THEME 1: Who PlayConnect+ Serves

Coordinators/Managers consistently agreed that *Who PlayConnect+ Serves* includes children with a range of known and unknown conditions—including but not limited to autism—and emphasised the critical role of supporting parents/carers at any stage of the family’s journey with their child’s development.

Staff perspectives on Subtheme 1.3, **Families with Non-Specific Concerns for their Children** and Subtheme 1.4 **Families with Diverse Support Needs for Other Members or the Unit** were mixed. Mirroring an elaboration provided shared in Facilitator/Assistant follow-up interviews, some Coordinators/Managers suggested PlayConnect+ can support families experiencing barriers to accessing other playgroups, even if not presenting with any specific developmental concerns for their children. Here, however, the barriers described included circumstances around access to transportation, juggling care responsibilities for multiple children, parents/carers in sole parenting circumstances, or with personal health concerns impacting their community participation capacity. Staff recognized the complex link between social isolation and child development—one interviewee noting “for example... a parent who, due to a medical condition like an immune disorder might [be socially isolated] and have concerns about their child’s development stemming from [that]”—and emphasized the potential value of PlayConnect+ to support such families similarly to for families seeking connection primarily because of identified special developmental needs for their child.

“[a parent might] have concerns about their child’s development stemming from... [other socially isolating circumstances]”

Also echoing elaboration Facilitators/Assistants provided to Subtheme 1.3—concerning **Families with Non-Specific Concerns for Their Children**—Coordinators/Managers also explained how some engaged parents/carers may not be

ready to acknowledge or discuss their child’s developmental differences, and moreover, may not feel terms like ‘disability’ or ‘developmental concern’ represent their child’s situation. Many staff, in a range of roles, describe PlayConnect+ as a ‘soft entry’ point for families who may initially disclose no particular disability or concerns for their child, but nevertheless attend, engage, and gradually build trust—“*Slowly, slowly... attending over a term or two [and then they say] ‘I think I’m concerned about my child. What do you think?’ ... [and] they start to listen to others*”. We heard a strong sense of pride in the way Coordinators/Managers conveyed PlayConnect+ addressing the needs of

“Slowly, slowly... attending over a term or two [and then they say] ‘I think I’m concerned about my child. What do you think?’ ...”

families with diverse vulnerabilities, where blurred boundaries present between child disability and social vulnerability. However, while actively and meaningfully engaging families with complex connection and support needs, Coordinators/Managers also voiced concerns that PlayConnect+ is insufficiently resourced to truly meet the needs of vulnerable families in their communities (described further in *Additional Insights: Family Engagement*, below).

Here, toward the end of the initial NECP funding period, these staff considered further how PlayConnect+ participation reflected **Families with Diverse Support Needs for Other Members or the Unit** (Subtheme 1.4), including parents/carers attending with target children, but also with extended family including the child’s other siblings. Coordinators/Managers described how PlayConnect+ may nurture positive, long-term engagement with families, wrapping around the family unit as a whole to extend support beyond the first

“[after their first child has ‘aged out’]... they [may] believe their concerns with their first child are [also likely for] their second child... [and they see value of ongoing] support...”

eligible child participant to their other siblings. For example, one staff member described how parents may continue to attend PlayConnect+ after their first eligible child has ‘aged out’, continuing to “...access the program because they [may] believe their concerns with their first child are [also likely for] their second child... [and see value of ongoing] support for themselves... Quite often, the parent has got some mental health concerns or [neurodivergence], so they feel comfortable [at PlayConnect+], and they’ve been attending for quite a while... and thinking... their [later-born] child may be on the same pathway as their first child... so that [Subtheme 1.4] is quite relevant [where families] want that early [support] for their second child too.”

“... they’ve been attending [PlayConnect+] for quite a while... and thinking... their [later-born] child may be on the same pathway as their first child... [and] want that early [support] for their second child too.”

 **ELABORATION ON STAFF INSIGHTS THEME 2: How PlayConnect+ Works**

Coordinators/Managers agreed strongly that PlayConnect+ was foremost a strengths-based program, and closely tailored to individual family needs, and that these features contributed to families' felt sense of safety, and belonging to and engagement with the program.

Here, however, Coordinators/Managers also shared their perspective on the critical role of the skills and lived experiences brought by their colleagues in group Facilitator/Assistant roles, as key to how PlayConnect+ works. For example, elaborating on **Staff and Families Share Experiences and Responsibilities** (original Subtheme 2.3; updated to 2.4), Coordinators/Managers generally agreed with this sentiment, but also recognised the importance of role modelling by Facilitators/Assistants—through sharing experiences, supporting new families participate actively and positively alongside their child (rather than expecting activities for children would be staff-led, with parents as onlookers). One staff member shared their joy in PlayConnect+ enriching parent-child relationships: *"I love that we're not therapeutic... that we're actually play-based and hopefully families can put a little bit of that to the side and just delight in their child."*

"I love that we're not therapeutic... we're actually play-based... hopefully families can put [therapy] to the side... and just delight in their child"

Role modelling by Facilitators/Assistants was also described by Coordinators/Managers in the context of supporting parents/carers to know *how* to play with their young children (with **Play as the Starting Point** added after follow-up staff interviews as a new Subtheme 2.1; and this point also linked to Subthemes 2.2

Strengths-based Approach, and Subtheme 2.3 A Tailored Experience as key features of on How PlayConnect+ Works). That is, staff reflected that the experience of many parents with children with disabilities or developmental concerns involves substantial care responsibilities, with much time focused on attending therapy appointments and related commitments. Regular opportunities to just play may therefore be infrequent or undervalued. Moreover, staff acknowledged that these children themselves may face challenges with what is normatively understood to be *play*. One interviewee described *"[Play] may look different [for different kids but]... we all have fundamental needs... kids do too [including to play]... no matter what is going on for them neurologically or physically"*. Hence, a key focus of staff—highlighting several subthemes on How PlayConnect+ Works; Strengths-Based Approach, Tailored Experience, and Play as the Starting Point—was to ensure participating children could be supported to play, as

"One of the things we try to model is [for] parents to meet their child where their child's at..."

"Children with additional needs or non-typical development may not play in the same way as [others]. It's demystifying for the parent to [be supported to realise] 'Look, [s/he's] still wanting to connect with me'. It looks a little bit different, [but we] lean into it and meet the child where they are."

a critical experience for their particular learning needs, and that parents/carers be supported to actively engage with their child. Another Coordinator/Manager elaborated on how *"[Facilitators] model [to parents] how to engage with their child and interact. So that family can go home with the novelty [and confidence] of 'I can do that, or 'My child really enjoyed that, I'm going to give it a go'... because maybe [the child] gave some eye contact or said a word for the first time."* One Coordinator/Manager comprehensively captured this combination of points in their explanation:

"[Facilitators] model [to parents] how to engage with their child and interact. So [they] can go home with the novelty [and confidence] of 'I can do that, or 'My child really enjoyed that... I'm going to give it a go'..."

"One of the things we try to model is to encourage parents to meet their child where their child's at... because often we find children with additional needs or non-typical development may not play in the same way as [others]. It's demystifying for the parent to [be supported to realise] 'Look, [s/he's] still wanting to connect with me'. It looks a little bit different, [but we] lean into it and meet the child where they are. For me, that's one of the strengths of what we do"



ELABORATION ON STAFF INSIGHTS THEME 3: Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+

Our presentation of insights on the Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+ was broadly endorsed by Coordinators/Managers. Here, toward the end of the original NECP funding period, these staff elaborated on the point of **Consistency: of Sessions, Groups, and the Program** (Subtheme 3.1) in the context of the main term-based playgroup delivery format for PlayConnect+, compared with school holiday/weekend playgroups. Specifically, we heard Coordinators/Managers advocate that PlayConnect+ weekly sessions could be offered across all 52 weeks of the year. Staff explained that gaps in regular delivery—outside of school term times, when PlayConnect+ school holiday playgroups might currently be offered anyhow—have a detrimental impact on family wellbeing, perhaps countering the positive impact of participation when the program is in session. One Coordinator/Manager explained that *“Whenever there is a gap, it really impacts [socially vulnerable families]... very important [in] talk[ing] about consistency that [we consider] ways of continuing that momentum [established through regular PlayConnect+ playgroups]... that routine, that continuity and support.”* This same staff member suggested any additional offering need not necessarily *“... be in the form of a playgroup, but maybe in the form of a school holiday program [all families] can still [attend to maintain] that routine, that continuity and support.”* That is, we heard these staff consider how the current term-based delivery format for the main PlayConnect+ sessions may miss the opportunity to maintain support for existing families and connect with new ones.

“Whenever there is a gap, it really impacts [socially vulnerable families]... [it’s important we consider] ways of continuing that momentum [established through regular sessions]... that routine, that continuity and support.”

“Probably [the] greatest feedback [we receive about PlayConnect+] is the lack of judgment...”

Among the Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+ we presented at follow-up interview with Coordinators/Managers, **Non-judgement: Families Feel Safe** (Subtheme 3.2) seemed to resonate most strongly. One staff member shared *“Probably [the] greatest feedback [we receive] is the lack of judgment...”* and elaborated this arising in the context that *“...when their child does tend to have big behaviours, parents often feel they don’t belong [at other programs]...”*. That PlayConnect+ provides a safe and inclusive environment for children and parents—where the adult staff and family members, and indeed the other children, accept all behaviours and support needs—was endorsed as underpinning a family’s positive experience at PlayConnect+ sessions, and feeding their sense of safety and belonging. Another Coordinator/Manager expressed: *“It’s hard to overstate the importance of acceptance... when families say, ‘We’ve tried other places and just don’t feel welcome’... that’s huge and shows you’re doing something really important”*.

“Non-judgement is a big theme for me as manager. I’ve really encouraged the facilitators to be that welcome space to accept all children. Pretty much all [facilitators] have lived experience”.

“[some families] don’t feel safe to provide their personal details or their child’s diagnosis because [disclosing that information]... might place them at some kind of risk, or [immigrants] might be worried about their visa situation... We need to respect that...”

The third Core Value at the Heart of PlayConnect+—Subtheme 3.3, initially labelled **Families First** when shared for feedback from staff, and updated to **Families Decide** after further discussions with Facilitators/Assistants—was also endorsed by Coordinators/Managers who elaborated on how prioritising families further contributes to sense of felt safety and belonging. Here, staff in these leadership roles elaborated on the example context of collecting family information for reporting purposes, explaining that some parents *“...don’t feel safe to provide their personal details or their child’s diagnosis because that might place them at some kind of risk [disclosing that information] in [a government] system, or [in the case of immigrants] they might be worried about their visa situation...”* further arguing that *“...we need to respect that in order to make sure they feel safe”*. Coordinators and Managers felt it could be acceptable to use mechanisms that would maintain a family’s anonymity whilst collecting and collating important reporting data (e.g., through the use pseudonyms), they were concerned with striking the right balance in terms of ensuring families sense of felt safety, particularly when first joining the group—arguably the most vulnerable time for families—against programmatic reporting requirements.



ADDITIONAL INSIGHTS FROM COORDINATORS AND MANAGERS

Further to sharing our insights from first-round interviews, we also sought Coordinator/Manager insights on three additional broad topics; summarised here with illustrative quotes (again, unattributed to protect staff confidentiality).

Additional Insights: Patterns of Family Interest and Engagement

We asked Coordinators/Managers to reflect on the current state of family engagement with PlayConnect+, here toward the end of the original NECP funding period. Staff in these programmatic leadership roles consistently reported they had seen **substantial growth in community demand** in this third year of PlayConnect+ program delivery: *"We've found we're at capacity in quite a few of our groups, [so] unfortunately we've had to [create] a waitlist for [new] families"*.

"We've found we're at capacity in quite a few of our groups"

"...it's great... [families] don't need to be linked into any other peak body, or a group [to find out about and access PlayConnect+]"

Coordinators/Managers agreed that some groups might remain under-enrolled—perhaps, for example, if situated in regional or remote locations. They also acknowledged the fluctuating nature of enrolments, including due to natural 'exit' when children reached school age. However, these staff in program leadership roles felt **community visibility and family engagement were currently strong**, including reflecting on successful reach via social media advertising—*"parents contacting PlayConnect+ through Instagram... and I guess it's great... they don't need to be linked into any other peak body, or a group [to find out about and access our] service"*.

"We've started to see an increase in children with different disabilities... [something] I've really been promoting... to make sure [organisations] are aware we're open to all children with [any] disability"

Several Coordinators/Managers commented on a **changing profile of children within newly engaged families**. They described that child age seemed to be shifting downward (i.e., toward younger children), perhaps a flow-on effect from recent changes in policy/funding for access to formal early childhood education (e.g., 3-year-old kindergarten) in some States/Territories. Some staff also reflected observing a change in the support needs of newly attending children, for example: *"We've started to see an increase in children with different disabilities... because it's [something] I've really been promoting... reaching out to different organisations to make sure they are aware we're open to all children with [any] disability."* Whilst **seen as a positive change**, reflecting intentional efforts at promotion and engagement of families with diverse support needs, interest from families with children with a range of disabilities was **also described to have highlighted some access challenges**. For instance, Coordinators/Managers shared examples of particular experiences of groups lacking the specific resources needed to adequately engage and support a child—*"Mum [of a child with physical disability] asked, 'Could we not get a [more suitable] chair?' And unfortunately, our budget would just not stretch for anything like that"*—sometimes resulting in families leaving PlayConnect+.

"...unfortunately, our budget would just not stretch for [specific resources] like that"

Another comprehensive example concerned the experience of a family where both parent and child were deaf:

"Unfortunately, [AusLan interpretation] is extremely expensive, and our funding doesn't cover that. We had to tell the family we could no longer fund [it]... so they can't access [PlayConnect+] anymore"

"They were really proud to be a deaf family... it was really lovely. They wanted to come to PlayConnect+ to connect with other families with disabilities. We supplied an AusLan interpreter because their NDIS plan [couldn't cover] enough hours. But unfortunately, it's extremely expensive, and our funding doesn't cover that. We had to tell the family we could no longer fund the interpreter... so they can't access [PlayConnect+] anymore."

Moreover, this same staff member commiserated *"So when we say, 'There's no wrong door... we'll support you every way we can', the reality is, we're not always able to do that"*.

"So when we say, 'There's no wrong door... we'll support you every way we can', the reality is, we're not always able to do that"

On family engagement, we also asked Coordinators/Managers to reflect specifically on program participation by families from **First Nations** and **Cultural and Linguistic Diversity** backgrounds. They conveyed feeling that enrolments from families in these two key priority target groups remain low, and spoke about several potential barriers here. One already raised in broader discussion around Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+ (Theme 3) concerned trust and safety concerns (i.e., Subtheme 3.3 Families First/Families Decide; and new Subtheme 3.4 Trust is Earned). Here, Coordinators/Managers expanded on trust and felt safety for families in these particular groups, within the context of broader of social and policy systems—*“There would be definitely some families... almost too scared to join a group if they’ve got a child with a disability... [immigrant families] worried that they won’t get residency”*. Staff also reflected on language barriers impacting both capacity to promote PlayConnect+ to these priority groups, and for families using primary languages other than English attend and effectively participate in a group once identified. One Coordinator/Manager questioned whether adequate cultural frameworks were in place at programmatic level—*“Are there ways we can build capacity of our [existing] families or [staff] to support CALD and First Nations families?”*. Another considered CALD and First Nation families who are attending PlayConnect+, wondering whether *“there [is any] evidence from families that we are doing this successfully... not just talking about it?”*.

“Are there ways we can build capacity of our [existing] families or [staff] to support CALD and First Nations families?”

“Are [we] doing this successfully... not just talking about it?”

Staff were eager to highlight the need for a more targeted approach to increase enrolments from these priority groups, and resource a specific evaluation framework here, which they felt could lead to capacity building within the PlayConnect+ program. However, their reflections here also highlighted challenges in situations where local staff do have the knowledge and strong motivation to succeed:

“[Particular staff] have worked really hard to establish cultural[ly-appropriate] protocols, do the right thing... [which isn’t] necessarily reflected in the actual data. [They] work hard to reach out to community...”

“[Particular regional staff] have worked really hard to establish cultural[ly-appropriate] protocols, do the right thing... [which isn’t] necessarily reflected in the actual data. [They] work hard to reach out to community members... to give an equivalent experience, so that children [in that community] feel just as supported in their space [as others across the country]”.

When asked about **families that PlayConnect+ may seek to serve, but be missing**, Coordinators/Managers acknowledged *“There are certainly families [whether] in metro[politan or] regional [areas] that we’re not servicing simply because we don’t have the funding to open more groups”*. One staff member shared *“There is unmet need in many areas. I think we do a great job, but we really don’t even scratch the surface”*. Example subgroups of families particularly vulnerable to social isolation (and associated risk to child developmental outcomes) were highlighted for consideration as particular priority groups, including families with parental mental illness or domestic violence experiences.

“There is unmet need in many areas. I think we do a great job, but we really don’t even scratch the surface”

Additional Insights: Specific Needs and Considerations

Again, approaching the end of the original NECP funding period, we also asked Coordinators/Managers to comment on any other matters arising for program operation and delivery—any specific needs or considerations for a particular jurisdiction, region, or other remit of responsibility.

“So even though through our contract, [this group] was supposed to be in a low socioeconomic area... sometimes we just couldn’t find the [suitable] venue”

Several staff shared with us the emerging and ongoing **challenge of identifying—and being able to afford access to—the right types of venues** at which to host PlayConnect+ groups. They described the particular and varied support needs of children in priority target groups, and the associated implications for requirements of physical space. For instance, many autistic or otherwise neurodivergent children need contained spaces (e.g., with secure fencing) due to potential absconding, presenting challenges for identifying and securing suitable venues in a given area—*“So even though through our [service delivery] contract, [this PlayConnect+ playgroup] was supposed to be in a low socioeconomic area... sometimes we just couldn’t find the [suitable] venue”*.

We asked Coordinators/Managers to share their experiences of offering **PlayConnect+ Online Playgroup sessions** (vs. the main face-to-face playgroup format) across the ~3-year delivery period. Here, they shared accounts of the considerable efforts and work involved in trying to establish and get traction with families in the PlayConnect+ Online playgroups. Coordinators/Managers described their Facilitators/Assistants initially running online playgroups week after week, often with no families showing up despite having expressed interest in doing so. Across the original NECP funding period, a programmatic decision was made to consolidate PlayConnect+ Online Playgroups into just four sessions, delivered by staff based at three State and Territory Playgroup Organisations (STOs)—based in New South Wales, the Northern Territory, and Victoria—and each open to families situated anywhere across the country.

Providing PlayConnect+ Online Playgroups was acknowledged as important to ensure reach to families based in regional and remote parts of Australia. However, staff explained how promoting PlayConnect+ to these families, and engaging them, requires extra work which their staff have struggled to find capacity for—*“You need so many more resources for an online session. It’s a lot more focused, and needs [dedicated] resources to help with that.”* Nevertheless, we also heard how representatives from the three STOs offering the consolidated online playgroups were working together effectively for planning and delivery via this format, with its non-trivial resourcing requirements—*“A lot of planning goes into it... [the staff doing this are] quite amazing.”*

“You need so many more resources for an online session. It’s a lot more focused, and needs [dedicated] resources to help with that”

Mirroring the pattern of broadly increased family engagement, we also heard that there has been increased engagement and attendance in the **PlayConnect+ School Holiday playgroups**, across all States and Territories. Some staff reflected further on specific needs for the delivering of this program component, primarily targeting school-aged children falling under NECP of Support for Children aged up to 8 years, but unable to attend other PlayConnect+ sessions delivered within school term times. One staff member shared:

“[We knew we] had to do a School Holiday Program and everyone was very, very nervous... ‘How are we going to do this? Are we going to get families?’ [And we thought] What families have [previously] been enrolled [in PlayConnect+] and have now gone off to kindergarten or school... now 5- to 8-year-olds? Let’s make the first [School Holiday Program] really easy [by] going back to our old families. We’ve had some real success stories... I think through having a School Holiday Program and re-engaging some of those families that have left the [main PlayConnect+ term-time] program”.

“One of the biggest concerns for [PlayConnect+] is about retention... assurance of staff... if staff don’t know within 6 months [if] they’re going to have continuity of employment, they start looking for other roles”

Coordinators/Managers expressed “one of the biggest concerns for the program is about retention of staff, assurance of staff”. We heard staff in these program leadership roles express how **staff retention and capacity were critical to operational success**—*“In a program... powering down and powering up... it takes time, and if staff don’t know within 6 months of a program ending that they’re going to have continuity of employment, they start looking for other roles”.* Moreover—and related to themes on How

“That loyalty, that retention piece of [program] staff [is critical]... because it takes time to build relationships [of trust with families]”

PlayConnect+ Works as a Collaborative: Group Members working Together (Subtheme 2.5), and Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+ including Consistency: of Sessions, Groups and the Program (Subtheme 3.1) and Trust is Earned (Subtheme 3.4)—we heard how staff retention and capacity were critical to PlayConnect+ effectively serving families. One Coordinator/Manager explained how investing in and retaining Facilitators/Assistants is critical because *“having that regular practitioner for [families] to be able to see and meet... so the sense of belonging, trust, bonding... can all become very easy. That loyalty, that retention piece of staff... because it takes time to build relationships [of trust with families]”.* Another reflected on the issue of staffing, agreeing *“Yes, we need qualified staff... and we should be also considering lived experience, and any other relevant experience from community services, social services...”* but then expanded more concretely their feeling that *“some proper guidance, training tools, materials... that capacity building piece is [currently] missing”.*

“ Yes, we need qualified staff... and we should consider lived experience... [but] proper guidance, training tools, materials... that capacity building piece is [currently] missing”

'Connection' is central to the spirit of PlayConnect+, and many "Families feel they're in this information void, or [that there is] too much information that they can't possibly process. They don't know what their next step is" for their child with special developmental needs. Indeed, we heard from staff across the full range of interviews about the role Facilitators/Assistants play in connecting the families in their groups to other local programs and professionals (e.g., see on How PlayConnect+ Works Subtheme 2.3, A Tailored Experience), drawing on their strong knowledge of local community opportunities and services (and supported by the knowledge shared from other families; see Subtheme 2.5 Collaborative: Group Members Working Together). However, the opportunity presented around program mid-point (June 2024) to trial a dedicated PlayConnect+ 'Linker' role in one State. One such staff member was initially engaged, followed by a second 6-months later (with funding for these positions ceasing at the end of the original NECP funding period, for a total 12-month trial period). We asked all staff to share any reflections on the **trial of this PlayConnect+ Linker role**, whether or not working in the State where this was trialled.

"[Many] families are in this information void, or [there is] too much information that they can't possibly process. They don't know what their next step is"

We heard that the PlayConnect+ Linker role offered a dedicated staff member for the region, tasked with facilitating connections between families and other community supports, including potentially providing resources and offering practical support with funding applications, etc. We heard that both of the staff employed as PlayConnect+ Linkers had professional qualifications in Social Work in addition to other relevant experience—a combination some staff felt deepened their knowledge of local community supports and services. We heard that one Linker attended every PlayConnect+ group session during the trial period, with their role described as—"not taking away from the Facilitator's role in supporting families, but providing an overarching layer and making sure every family has the opportunity to talk to [a] Social Worker... [and] sometimes [spending] the whole session talking to a family...". Moreover, we heard that the PlayConnect+ Linkers often followed-up with families outside of sessions—"... or they [would] do home visits and after hours as well"—to support connection to other services, and that within the first 6-month monitoring period, the sole PlayConnect+ Linker in the role connected participating families with ~70 different organisations.

"[Linkers were] providing an overarching layer and making sure every family has the opportunity to talk to [a] Social Worker... sometimes [spending] the whole session talking to a family..."

Having an available staff member, capable of investigating relevant options for families, and of spending additional time with those in particular need, was clearly highly valued by some Coordinators/Managers we spoke to, not limited to those co-located in the region where this initiative was trialled. Other Coordinators/Managers we spoke to, however, expressed that Facilitators/Assistants are capable of facilitating family connections with community, and felt they would advocate budgetary spend on additions to PlayConnect+ other than a formal Linker role (e.g., for staff capacity building training for existing staff). However, we also heard the case that Facilitators/Assistants are employed for PlayConnect+ across only few hours per week (3-4 hours, including time for preparation and program delivery), and also often hold other employment beyond their PlayConnect+ work. Some Coordinators/Managers therefore acknowledged that even if Facilitators/Assistants might be motivated to do so, they would potentially not have the capacity to follow-up with families outside of PlayConnect+ session times, while staff in a dedicated PlayConnect+ Linker role could be resourced to do this efficiently. One staff member shared "I think the Linker role is that in-between that's really needed... [to work to] understand the families and find out about many more services".

Additional Insights: The Policy and Funding Environment

In late 2024, an **additional 2-years of NECP funding** for PlayConnect+ was announced, providing assurance of ongoing program delivery through mid-2027. When we spoke to Coordinators/Managers at follow-up interview, this **was welcome news**—"A clear direct vision for at least [another] one-and-a-half years gives a lot of assurance to the sector". Indeed, consistency of funding was advocated as a priority by all of the Coordinators/Managers we spoke to—assurance for their families, for staff, and a stable foundation for programmatic priorities more broadly, including given the time required to develop and apply culturally appropriate frameworks. One staff member expressed: "I think we're actually a beautiful type of program in terms of being cost effective, but also being effective in engaging with families... and dyads... [parents together in] peer-to-peer dyads, the child-to-child dyad, but also... the parent-to-child dyad that you don't always get in other playgroups or therapeutic groups".

"A clear direct vision for at least [another] one-and-a-half years gives a lot of assurance to the sector"

Notwithstanding the generally positive response to this news, these staff did also note the amount funding on offer—a direct extension of the first three years of NECP ‘Support for Children’ funding—would create **challenges for ongoing implementation** of PlayConnect+. That is, they described to us the significant rise in expenditure since initial program budgeting—including costs associated with employee benefits, consumable materials, and costs of venue hire—that would necessitate increased funding to deliver the equivalent service, or reduction in service delivery requirement to fit feasibly within the available 2025-2027 budget.

“[extended, but non-indexed funding]... like putting a foot on the accelerator but then putting it on the brake at the same time...”

Subsequently, these staff described preparing to make adjustments at their sites, perhaps going even so far as close a playgroup to make budgetary ends meet. In describing the impact of concurrent increase in community demand for PlayConnect+ and non-indexed future funding, one Coordinator/Manager used the analogy of *“Putting a foot on the accelerator but then putting it on the*

brake at the same time, because you don’t also want to over promise to families”.

Coordinators/Managers shared their views regarding the **strategic and operational oversight of the PlayConnect+ program**, delivered locally by the consortium of State and Territory Playgroup Organisations (STOs; and/or their subcontractors) with leadership from Autism Queensland, including through the work of a dedicated National Program Coordinator. Staff described a key function of this National Program Coordinator role as facilitating monthly, national Community of Practice meetings, which they felt provided a cross-jurisdictions forum for resource and information sharing—including updates from the Commonwealth Department of Social Services (DSS; as NECP funder)—and discussing reporting requirements and aligning activities around significant national events (e.g., NAIDOC Week, National Families Week etc.). These meetings were described as fostering a sense of national identity and collaboration toward program delivery, notwithstanding notable regional or local differences in group operations and community needs—*“Across Australia... [everyone] is going to have a lot of different [needs]... the Northern Territory compared to [say] Tasmania... or Victoria.... There’s a lot of scope for [our local staff] to have ownership of their session planning. We come together to share resources in our Community of Practice”.*

“There’s a lot of scope for [local staff] to have ownership of their session planning...” and “...flexibility to decide on local policies or prioritise” and “[then] we come together [nationally] to share resources in our Community of Practice”

Specifically, while subcontract program delivery service agreements stipulate the numbers of PlayConnect+ sessions to be delivered by each consortium partner, Coordinators/Managers spoke of the **autonomy each STO retains** for determining where their groups are situated, and for decision-making around when to close or relocate a group to better serve local community need. This flexibility was **widely described as a strength**, particularly in comparison to funding/service agreement models for a precursor program to PlayConnect+ which they described as more rigid (e.g., regarding the numbers of groups in Metropolitan vs. regional areas). Staff conveyed appreciation for the current operational model in which they felt supported through a regular collaborative national discussion forum, but also empowered to work closely with communities in their home State/Territory, to identify local needs, especially in regional and remote areas, and adapt accordingly: *“There’s flexibility to decide on local policies or priorities”.*

Nevertheless, Coordinators/Managers also highlighted **significant challenges with delivering PlayConnect+ in regional and remote locations**, where families may be dispersed across vast areas making consistent engagement

“The numbers [of regional families] might not be high, but the need is still high”

difficult. One staff member expressed *“The numbers [of families] might not be high, but the need is still high”* and this high need could be attributed to factors beyond simple geographic isolation, also reflecting the risk of social

isolation (e.g., families where mothers are the primary or sole carer, and/or in the context of fathers employed in fly-in fly-out [FIFO] work). Staff emphasised that families in such circumstances of geographic and potential social isolation frequently experience limited local service access, and long waitlists for services to services that do exist. Despite the clear need for supports for families in regional and remote areas, staff also conveyed the significantly higher costs and

“[Others can’t] truly understand... the additional [costs] for us to service [our regional] communities and workforce as we do for [our] Metropolitan area, [and as] we should be doing... we have [additional] travel needs [but] no additional funding”

complexities of servicing these regions through PlayConnect+. Staff in program leadership roles across several STOs drew our attention to funding gaps required to meet their workforce development costs—“*[Others can’t] truly understand... the additional [costs] for us to service [our regional] communities and workforce as we do for [our] Metropolitan area, [and as] we should be doing. We would like to actually physically talk to and train our [regional] staff every school holidays... so four times a year... we have travel needs [but] no additional funding*”. An evident tension between regional community need and capacity—particularly under defined group/session numbers and static funding structures—further highlighted the value of flexibility in how STOs implemented their local delivery, including seeking to increase investment where needed to ensure equity of access to PlayConnect+ across communities.

“[Reporting and evaluation are] a lot of extra work, but it’s so important to know what’s working... what you can do more of, or what might be working less well”

We asked Coordinators/Managers to share any **views on contractual reporting requirements and evaluation activities**. Here, staff acknowledged the additional workload involved, but also stressed their perceived value: “*It’s a lot of extra work, but it’s so important to know what’s working... what you can do more of, or what might be working less well*” and offered the suggestion “*We should have a separate quota that focuses on quality—on the impact and outcomes for [individual] families... how their lives may have changed or been transformed.*” Staff also strongly endorsed involving families in any evaluation process, emphasising the importance of proactively building capacity for families to contribute meaningfully: “*We educated them about why we are*

doing it, what’s the intent... what’s the need... why we are asking so many [things] because definitely we are asking a lot. And... they have to be with us, or else we can’t do this”. But this same interviewee also reflected: “*the strong response [returning SCORE surveys] indicates [families] are with us... they understand why we are doing it... why they need to be [involved]*.” Notwithstanding this success, in the context of two evaluation activities underway led by our team—one focused on hearing the Staff views, and the other seeking to hear directly from families (described below)—and an independent commissioned evaluation of NECP activities also seeking input from PlayConnect+ families and staff, some Coordinators/Managers reflected the challenges with managing multiple potentially competing demands.

“We educated [families] about why we are doing [evaluations], what’s the intent... what’s the need... why we are asking so many [things] because definitely we are asking a lot...” and “the strong response indicates... they understand why we are doing it... why they need to be [involved]”

Finally here, Coordinators/Managers also shared their views about **early years disability support policy** more broadly, including in the context of anticipated future **‘Foundational Supports’ funding**. Noting the lack of detail on what shape and scope Foundational Supports funding might ultimately take, these staff offered the view that PlayConnect+ could play—indeed, in many cases was felt already is playing—a valuable Foundational Support role. These staff also expressed concerns, however, around of the challenges families were currently facing, in the interim between this new announcement and implementation:

“One of my biggest concerns... one of the reasons we feel we’re getting an uptick in families wanting to engage with [PlayConnect+]... is there’s a lot of talk about ‘Foundational Supports’, but not [yet] the funding or services... and families are still finding maybe their NDIS support is being restricted, or they’re not actually able to [register with the NDIA at all], whereas they might have been able to [do that, if they were in this position] 18 months ago.”

Coordinators/Managers also regularly spoke to the topical issue of **whether supports for young children** with identified developmental needs/disabilities and their families **should be best provided through specialised/segregated** (i.e., for children with special support needs) **vs. inclusive/mainstream formats** (i.e., accessible by all children and families). Here, all interviewees acknowledged the value of inclusive programs, like community playgroups, but also strongly affirmed the need for specialised programs, like PlayConnect+. They reiterated that, for many families, PlayConnect+ serves as a crucial stepping stone toward inclusion—grounded in Non-Judgement: Families Feel Safe (Subtheme 3.2) among the Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+. One Coordinator/Manager described the critical importance of a safe and understanding environment in the early stages of a developmental journey for a child with additional needs and their parents/carers and family: “*In the*

“In the early days, parents... feel so uncomfortable going to a general playgroup because of [potential] judgement... they ultimately want their child to be included... But in the early days, [they] really appreciate having their own space”

early days, parents don't know what's [going on for their child]—they just have a feeling. But they feel so uncomfortable going to a general playgroup because of the [potential for] judgement. Of course, they ultimately want their child to be included... like all the other kids. But in the early days, [they] really appreciate having their own space.” Relatedly, the shared lived experience—both among families in a group, and between families and Facilitators/Assistants—was emphasised as “One of the greatest strengths of PlayConnect+... families being able to come and talk [together] and normalise what can be a very scary experience, especially at those very early stages where [families are] unsure how their child is developing [and what to expect]. Others can help guide and almost become a navigator... through their own lived experience. So, I truly believe there's a place for it”, and broader need for some specialised services.

“One of the greatest strengths of PlayConnect+... families being able to come and talk... normalise what can be a very scary experience”

Additional Insights: Future Service Delivery and Evaluation Priorities

We concluded our follow-up interviews with staff in Coordinator/Manager roles by asking about their views on priorities for PlayConnect+ over the next phase of NECP funding (2025-2027) and aspirational priorities beyond this timeframe, with the following identified as likely to strengthen the reach, sustainability, and impact of PlayConnect+.

- A key priority expressed by Coordinators/Managers was to **secure increased and long-term funding** for PlayConnect+. Here, staff highlighted the strong potential for program expansion to meet growing demand, particularly in underserved regional areas:

“My biggest priority would be to get more funding. We could probably triple what we do within a month. I believe there's such unmet need now that [PlayConnect+] is set up... and also much unmet need in other services... so families [in regional areas] aren't getting much at all... and there are some big and small regional hubs we'd really like to have a better footprint in because [other] services don't go there.”

- For staff in some locations, ongoing challenges with **reaching families and maximising participation** was reflected in a key priority around increasing awareness of PlayConnect+, addressing barriers to access, and refining referral pathways to ensure full utilisation of available program capacity:
- With sustained collaboration with schools and other community services seen as vital to supporting effective child transitions—such as into formal schooling—and assisting informed decision-making for parents/carers—such as between specialist and mainstream systems—staff conveyed **further partnership development** as an important strategic priority, **to ensure coordinated cross-system supports**:

“How can investment from government and philanthropy be channelled to ensure no gaps in program delivery... and ensure a collective piece of [support] work, and investment for children?”

- All staff advocated for **professional development and capacity-building** as key priority areas. For some staff (as outlined above) this included the expressed desire for dedicated ongoing funding for PlayConnect+ Linkers—viewed as instrumental to outreach, family engagement, and service navigation support. For other staff (also described above), this was expressed more in terms of upskilling Facilitators/Assistants—targeted training for confident program delivery:
- Looking forward, staff proposed creative options for **diversifying PlayConnect+ delivery**, beyond the primary weekly supported face-to-face- and online playgroup formats, potentially also **to include more informal, in-community engagement options**. Suggestions, such as having a mobile PlayConnect+ van to take the program into communities for diverse local delivery, could provide a softer entry first connection point for families in need.
- Finally, a further creative aspirational suggestion was provided by staff, here toward future evaluation efforts. That is, staff recommended that efforts be put toward **capturing and conveying children's own experiences of PlayConnect+** in future evaluation work, to ensure efforts at continuous program improvement are informed by the lived experiences of children as the intended ultimate beneficiaries of PlayConnect+.

6. Experiences Shared by Parents/Carers

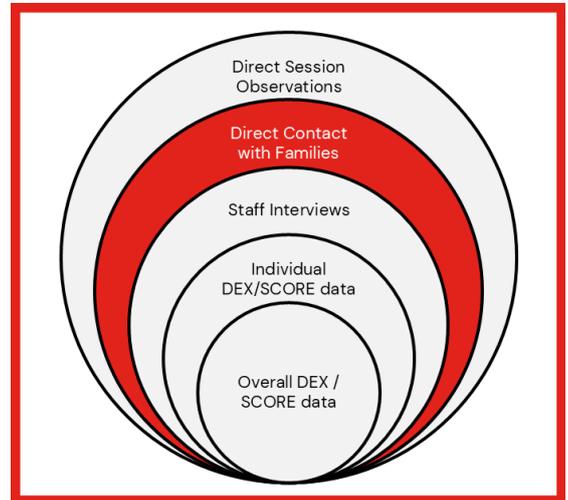
Aim of this Evaluation Component

Further to in depth staff interviews, we secured Human Research Ethics Committee approval for a study related to Evaluation Plan Option D (HEC24045; 15th April 2024).

Here, we specifically sought contact with PlayConnect+ families—to hear their perspectives and experiences of participating parents/carers, and to meet children who are the intended direct beneficiaries of *NECP Support and Connection for Young Children with Disability or Developmental Concerns*.

Our PlayConnect+ Family Experience interviews aimed:

1. To gain insights into the overarching evaluation questions via systematic gathering and analysis of views shared by families accessing the program;
2. To hear how parents/carers felt about their own-, and their child's development, including through their engagement with PlayConnect+; and
3. To understand, from a family perspective, what is working well and what obstacles or challenges might be present (including for which parents/carers, and/or for which children, and why this might be so).



Family Interviews: Study Design and Procedure

Broad Approach

To engage families involved with PlayConnect+, and systematically gather their perspectives and experiences, we designed a semi-structured protocol similar to a clinical, telehealth-type appointment. This included a conversational interview element, with a parent/carer, and the opportunity to meet their target child, and observe the pair interacting together in their home environment. Again, development work for this study was led by the two La Trobe University researchers who had worked closely with Autism Queensland and the Evaluation Working Group across the whole of the evaluation period (Hudry, Aulich) with input from the broader La Trobe University research team (Bent, Green, Muniandy, Pye, Smith). The family interviews were conducted by a subset of this La Trobe University research team (Hudry, Bent, Smith, Muniandy).

Post-interview data processing and analysis were again led by the La Trobe University researchers with the greatest knowledge of the PlayConnect+ program (Hudry, Aulich), with other members of the research team supporting specific elements, including drawing on their personal expertise and to ensure some degree of independence when processing different aspects of the data for this sample of participating families (e.g., so a given parent/carer's satisfaction ratings would not influence our interpretation of their experiences shared during semi-structured interview). All members of the La Trobe University research team input into the interpretation of family interview findings and the development of this report.

Families Engaged to Share their Experiences and Steps Taken to Protect Confidentiality

As with the staff interviews, we sought diverse representation of shared family experiences—including families:

- From each State/Territory, and from regional/remote as well as metropolitan areas;
- Whose children had a range of support needs and/or formally diagnosed conditions;
- Reflecting a range of socio-cultural circumstances (including the specified priority target groups), and
- Having accessed PlayConnect+ across the range of options (i.e., face-to-face-, online-, school holiday- and music therapy playgroups), and for different durations (i.e., only recently/occasionally, or consistently for many months).

To this end, any and all families engaged with PlayConnect+, or in relevant contact with the State and Territory Playgroup Organisations (STOs) were eligible to participate in our family experiences study. Recruitment began following ethics approval (secured in April of 2024). Here, we report on the experiences shared by 20 participating families, the large majority interviewed in 2024 but with some final interviews occurring in early 2025.

Again, we set no minimum or maximum sample size, planning to engage as many families as possible and willing to hear from any and all families where parents/carers wished to share their experiences. While we also sought parent/carer permission to allow us to meet their child, and observe the pair interacting together, this was not a requirement of study participation (i.e., parents/carers could opt to speak to us only, and not involve their child).

PlayConnect+ staff supported the advertising of this study to families, communicating directly about the opportunity to families in their groups or sharing information online (e.g., in newsletters, to closed social media groups, etc).

Parents/Carers were invited to contact our team with any questions. If willing to participate, families could schedule an interview time directly, or contact our team for support to do so, again with all Family Experience interviews conducted online via Zoom, to ensure equitable opportunity across all States/Territories and facilitate our recording for subsequent transcription and analysis. Again, interviews were planned for between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on how much parents/carers might have to share, and including time to meet their child and observe the pair interact together in play and snack time. Participating parents/carers provided written informed consent, and verbal confirmation of consent was checked at the start of the session, before beginning the interview.

To support their participation and expectations of what would be involved, families were provided with an Interview Guide in advance. Parents/carers were also offered a gift voucher in recognition of and thanks for their time taken to speak to us (i.e., \$50 for estimated 1-hour participation; pro-rata for shorter or longer sessions).

While staff facilitated our contact with the families accessing PlayConnect+ in their region, formal recruitment and consenting was the responsibility of the La Trobe University research team. This ensured participation was voluntary, and that confidentiality of the information shared by specific parents/carers would be protected. Families were encouraged to share both positive experiences or impressions of PlayConnect+, and also any negative experiences or constructive feedback.

To further secure individual participant confidentiality—the specific parents/carers we spoke to, and their target children who they told us about and who we often also met—we have intentionally obscured or altered some details reported in our findings. That is, we may have adjusted or intentionally minimised detailed presentations of individuals’ personal information.

Where we have included illustrative quotes, we may have edited these to ensure confidentiality and/or to streamline the message, whilst maintaining the core meaning of what was shared with us. Moreover, any names to which quotes are attributed are pseudonyms (and any possible overlap of the pseudonyms selected and real names of parents/carers or children who access PlayConnect+ is purely coincidental).

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY **PlayConnect+**

**What to Expect if you Participate in our Study
Family Experiences of PlayConnect+**

Part A: We will ask parents/caregivers...

About your Child and Family and How You have become part of PlayConnect+

We will also ask you to tell us about your child: what kind of person he or she is and how get along together.

We will ask general background information about you, your child, and your family

About your PlayConnect + Experience So Far

When and how you became involved
Where and how often you attend
Why you attend and any challenges

Who attends from your family
How many other families attend
How you all get along

About How the PlayConnect+ Group Runs

Who leads the group
What happens during sessions
What works well; What could be better

About Other Services You Might Access

What services, and how you found them
What works well
What could be better

Part B: We would like to meet your child to see his/her skills and how you interact together...

Free Play

About 5 minutes of playing together with your child's favourite toys or activities



Snack Time

About 5 minutes of playing together with your child's favourite toys or activities



La Trobe University Ethics Approval: HEC24045

Quantitative Measures and Qualitative Interview Topics

To achieve rich, detailed insights into families' experiences, whilst minimising participation burden, our interviews included two more structured, quantifiable elements, alongside the more semi-structured qualitative interview.

Five Minute Speech Sample (FMSS; based on Benson et al., 2011) collection was the first element of the session, whereby the interviewer asked parents/carers to speak about themselves and their child, uninterrupted, for 5 minutes:

Standard FMSS interview prompt: "I'd like to hear your thoughts and feelings about [CHILD], in your own words, and without me interrupting with any questions or comments. When I ask you to start, if you could please speak for five minutes, telling me what kind of person [CHILD] is, and how you get along together"

While the parent/carer spoke, the interviewer listened and took notes on points for later follow-up, using non-verbal signals—head nodding, facial expressions—to encourage continued description for the full 5 minutes. This structured protocol allows rich insight into the parent/carer, child and family, and generates a standardised speech sample for later quantitative coding offering comparability across participants (within a study, and across other studies).

In our past research, we have found the FMSS to be an effective 'icebreaker', and to offer useful information about families and the relationships between members (e.g., Smith et al., 2022a). Research also suggests the FMSS is a good way of characterising the parent/carer experiences, to understand personal wellbeing, family functioning, and child development, in the context of autism and related conditions (e.g., Benson et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2022b).

Satisfaction Ratings were sought from parents/carers toward the end of each interview; specifically in response to four questions asked as follows:

For each, we asked parents/carers to use a 10-point rating scale, from

1 = "Not at All" ← → 10 = "Completely"

- How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?
- How satisfied are you with [Child's] life as a whole?
- Do you believe you have all the skills you need to be a good parent to [Child]?
- How satisfied are you with your experience of PlayConnect+?

We reassured parents/carers there was no 'right' or 'wrong' answer, encouraging them to just consider how they felt.

Gathering **Qualitative Insights about PlayConnect+** was the main focus of our interview, seeking to hear directly from

parents/carers. We began this part of the session by explaining that we were interested to hear honestly parents'/carers' experiences of and feelings about PlayConnect+, again reassuring them there were no 'right' or 'wrong' things to say, and that we were interested in:

- Their own experiences and views;
- Any broader context they could share about their group/s, including staff and other families; and
- What was good about PlayConnect+ and anything that could be better for their experience.

Each conversation here followed the parent/carer's lead, with the interviewer keeping these topics in mind, but following up on what the parent/carer shared with additional questions as relevant, and skipping any planned questions/topics if unnecessary, on the basis of information that had already been shared.




What to Expect if you Participate in our Study
Family Experiences of PlayConnect+



Part A: We will ask parents/caregivers...

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>About your Child and Family and How You have become part of PlayConnect+</p> <p>We will also ask you to tell us about your child: what kind of person he or she is and how get along together.</p> <p>We will ask general background information about you, your child, and your family</p> | <p>About your PlayConnect+ Experience So Far</p> <p>When and how you became involved Where and how often you attend Why you attend and any challenges</p> <p>Who attends from your family How many other families attend How you all get along</p> |
| <p>About How the PlayConnect+ Group Runs</p> <p>Who leads the group What happens during sessions What works well; What could be better</p> | <p>About Other Services You Might Access</p> <p>What services, and how you found them What works well What could be better</p> |

Findings from Interviews with 20 Families

Summary of Participating Parents/Carers and their 'Target' Children

Family interviews were conducted between April 2024 and May 2025, by four La Trobe University researchers (Bent, Hudry, Muniandy, Smith). Our records show that 41 parents/carers accessed the online study information form, and 36 completed the Consent Form. However, only 21 completed an interview (i.e., 15 were non-responsive to contact attempts for scheduling).

Each participating parent/carer was asked to identify one 'target' child for the purpose of interview—usually their one child accessing PlayConnect+. Some families had more than one child attending PlayConnect+, however, so we asked parents/carers to choose one 'target' child to focus on here.

Our final sample reflects 20 families (and represents 20 'target children') but 21 individual participating parents/carers (i.e., two adults from one family both wishing to be interviewed). There was representation from across Australia, with distribution approximately consistent with relative State/Territory size (i.e., 1 or 2 families from less populous- and between 3 and 8 from more populous States/Territories).

While most participating families were from Major Cities of Australia, one third were regional Areas according to Socio-Economic Indices for Areas ([SEIFA]; Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2021). SEIFA indicators also indicated most families were from places representing moderate to least socio-economic disadvantage, though we did have some representation from the most or Professional roles; Occupation Standard Classification for Australia [OSCA]; ABS 2024). Around half of interviewees disclosed their own disability or neurodivergence condition (e.g., autism, ADHD, mental health conditions).

The 'target' children—10 boys, 10 girls; average age 3.5 years—included subgroups with complex medical/genetic conditions, undergoing assessment (e.g., for autism and/or ADHD), or with developmental/language delays. Over two thirds indicated possible or confirmed autism for their 'target' children. Some described relevant conditions among siblings/parents, even if no current concerns for their 'target' child.

Participating parents/carers described a range of socio-cultural backgrounds for family members, indicating that we have some representation here from First Nations families, and families from CALD backgrounds (details withheld to protect confidentiality). Most interviewees described English as the only language used at home, although some noted use of other languages also (e.g., from Asia-Pacific region, and Australian Sign Language [AuSLan]). Participants were mostly from two-adult households, but included some sole-carers and extended family structures (e.g., grandparents or other adults living at home).

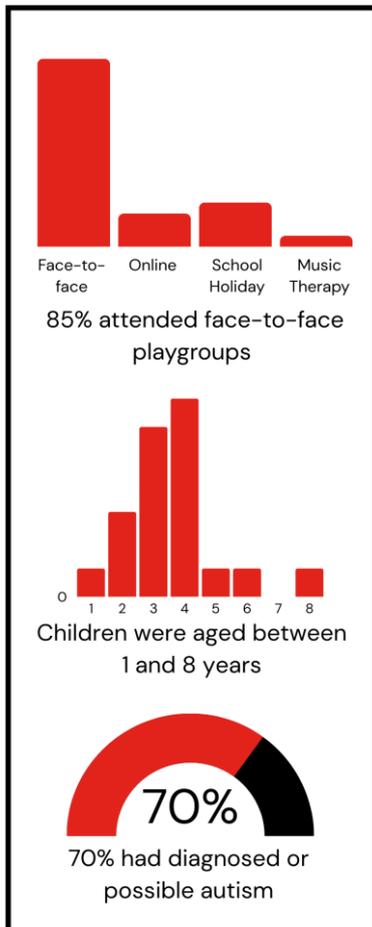


Fig.16. Snapshot of target children

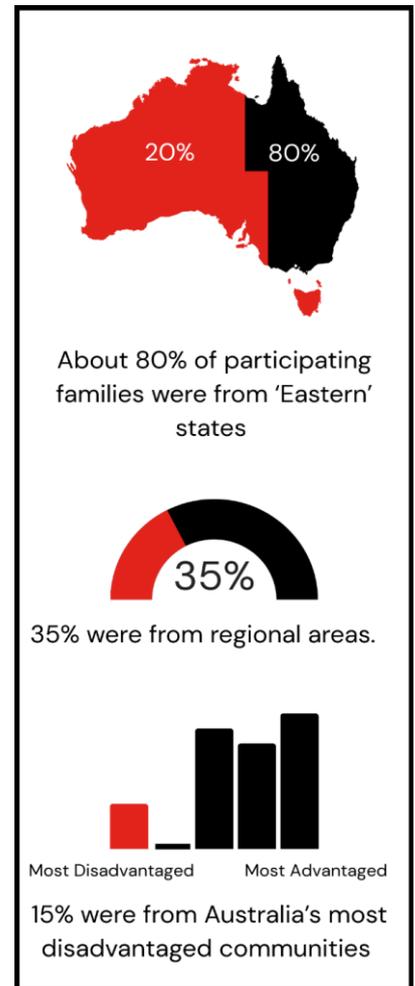


Fig.15. Snapshot of families

Summary of Quantitative Information: FMSS & Satisfaction Ratings

Five Minute Speech Sample (FMSS) segments of each interview were transcribed and coded following the Autism-Specific FMSS protocol (Benson et al., 2011) for validated insights into the early-years parenting experience, including personal wellbeing, family functioning, and child development in the context of autism and related conditions:

"...if you could please speak for five minutes, telling me what kind of person [CHILD] is, and how you get along together..."

Coding was led by one La Trobe University researcher (Green) who has completed training on this tool and used it in similar research, but was not otherwise involved in interviewing families and had no access to other information about them (and whose coding was solely based on what parents shared at this point, and not influenced by other information shared or situational factors). AFMSS coding generates the following ratings, with illustrative quotes:

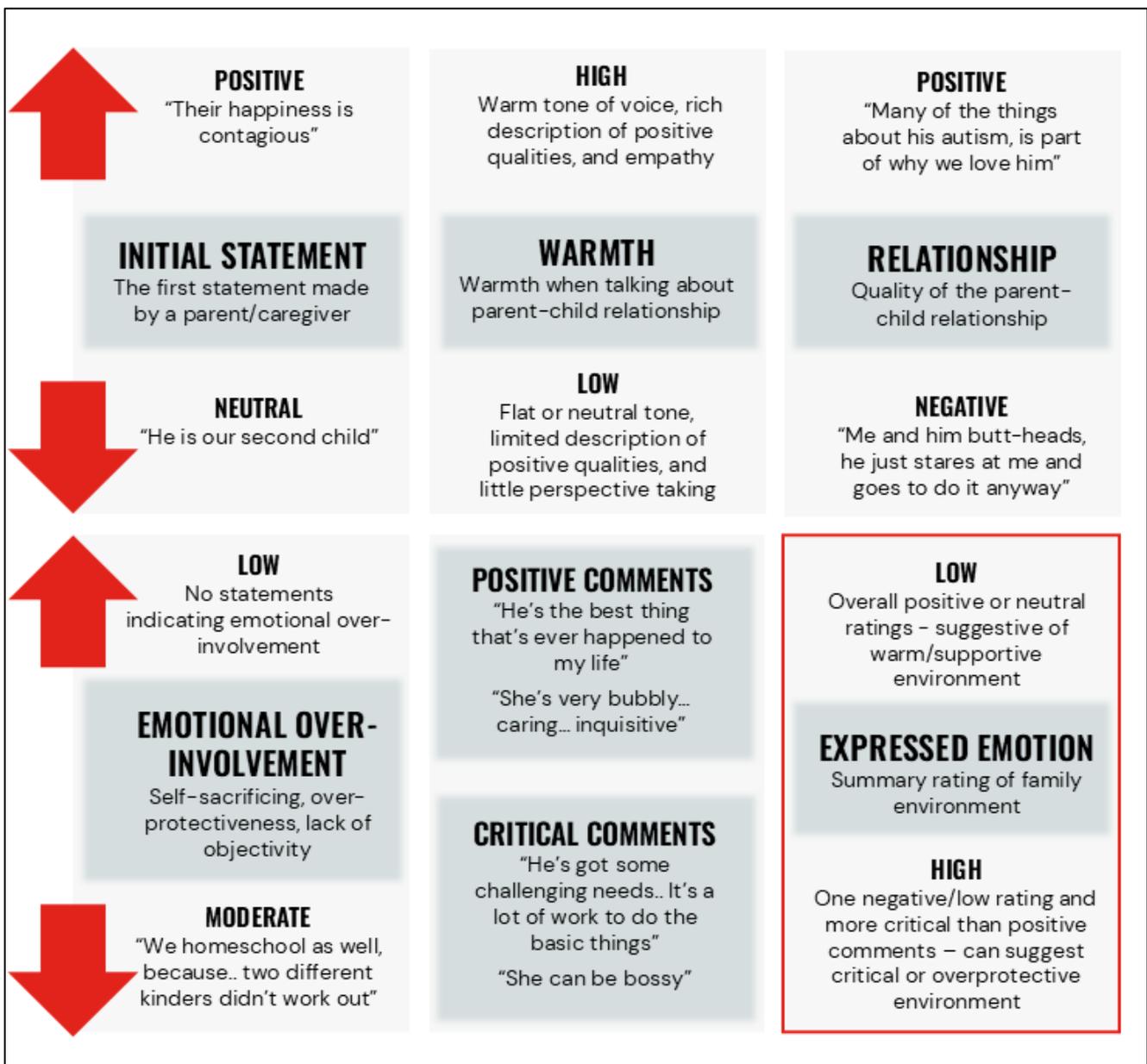


Figure 17. Summary of concepts considered and rated within the Five Minute Speech Sample (FMSS)

Among descriptions from 21 parents/carers about 20 'target' children (i.e., one child described by two parents in separate interviews), we heard variety in emotional language used and the parent-child relationships described. We summarise the AFMSS codes across the sample of parents/carers we spoke to as follows:

- When asked to "...speak for five minutes, telling me what kind of person [CHILD] is, and how you get along together...", parents'/carers' **Initial Statements** about their children were mostly neutral, although some made positive initial remarks. No parent/carer we spoke to led with a critical or negative initial comment about their child; a pattern in line with our previous research findings whereby parents of young children with identified autism diagnoses or accessing community support for developmental differences/concerns rarely made negative initial statements when asked to speak about their children.
- Most parents/carers then generally spoke about "...what kind of person [CHILD] is..." in ways that signalled moderate, and occasionally even high overall **Warmth**—including through warm tone of voice, rich descriptions of positive qualities, suggesting emotional warmth, and descriptions suggesting appropriate concern and/or empathy for their child's situation and needs. The FMSS sample for only two parents/carers we spoke to were rated as 'low' in terms of overall Warmth. Low ratings of Warmth appeared to be independent of other indicators of the parent-child relationship, such as the number of positive and critical comments made about the child. While one parent equally described their child in positive and critical terms, the other parent overwhelmingly described their child in a positive manner. Similarly, findings from our previous research suggest that low overall ratings of Warmth may be independent of other indicators of the parent-child relationship, including positive and critical comments, as well as ratings for Relationship.
- Ratings of **Relationship**—from parent/carer descriptions of "...how you get along together..."—were mostly neutral and occasionally positive. The description from one parent/carer we spoke to was rated as negative here, however, again with similar pattern of findings to our previous research, where parents only rarely described their relationships with their young autistic children in somewhat negative terms (and mostly neutral or occasionally positive terms). Both here and in our past work, where parents/carers have given descriptions that were coded as 'negative' overall, there was also evidence of parents describing their children using mostly negative or critical terms (vs. making few if any positive comments; described further below).
- Most descriptions on "...what kind of person [CHILD] is, and how you get along together...", gave a sense of low **Emotional Over-Involvement** suggesting that the parents/carers we spoke to were balanced and appropriately emotionally involved with their young children (i.e., not counterproductively over-involved/over-protective). There were cases of parents/carers rated with moderate- Emotional Over-Involvement, suggesting these individuals sacrificed some aspects of their own lives—such as work, personal care or leisure—to care for their child. None of the parents we spoke to were rated as high on Emotional Over-Involvement, such as might suggest a lack of trust in others to support them in the care of their child.
- While some interviewees made **critical comments**—negative or evaluative remarks—about their children, this was fairly rare among the parents/carers we spoke to; with most making no such remarks, or just one, within the 5 minutes of speaking freely about their children. We note one example of a parent/carer making several critical comments (6 in total across the sample), but that this same person also made the highest number of positive comments about their child, and so this may simply reflect them presenting a 'balanced' description of their child.
- Most parents/carers we spoke to provided at least a few—and sometimes *very many*—**positive comments** about their children; mostly between 1 and 3, but up to as many as 16 such comments within the 5 minutes. It was not the case that parents/carers made *either positive or critical comments* about their child; any combination of these was possible and indeed noted in our interviews. That is, as noted above, one parent/carer made several critical comments and also very many positive comments about their child. Some parents/carers made few of either type of overt evaluative remark, and other parents/carers fell in between these positions.

In summary, FMSS ratings for the large majority of PlayConnect+ parents/carers we interviewed conveyed low overall **Expressed Emotion** when speaking about their children—a broad indicator that these parent-child dyads were interacting and getting along well together. We did note that around a quarter of families presented somewhat unusual or 'idiosyncratic' cases here, potentially signalling greater risk adverse outcomes and need for support. These were four parents/carers rated with 'borderline'- and one with 'high' Expressed Emotion. The 'borderline' cases reflected parents/carers who made relatively more critical than positive comments about their children, or made positive comments but with limited sense of emotional Warmth in their descriptions. The single parent/carer rated with high overall Expressed Emotion had made more critical than positive comments when describing their child, but also conveyed a sense of generally more negative quality parent-child relationship.

We present two FMSS case examples (with names/other details altered to protect participant confidentiality):

- One illustrating the more typical and positive pattern we heard in the descriptions from most parents/carers who participated in our PlayConnect+ Family Experience interviews, and
- Another reflecting a more unusual or idiosyncratic example, such as we heard from a subset of parents/carers who participated in our interviews, and potentially signals increased risk of adverse child/family outcomes and the need for additional or sustained support.

MORE TYPICAL, AND POSITIVE FMSS CASE EXAMPLE

Myra started speaking about her son, Marco, with a neutral initial statement—sharing where and when he had been born. Her tone of voice was warm when talking about him and she conveyed empathy when describing the physical discomfort he experiences. Myra also made positive remarks about Marco’s cheekiness, and enjoyment of music. It was unclear from her description whether Myra herself enjoyed their time interacting together, so their overall relationship quality was coded ‘neutral’. Across the five minutes of speaking about Marco, Myra made one critical comment—about challenges his disability presents for the family. There was no evidence of emotional over-involvement and, overall, Myra’s speech sample was coded ‘low’ for expressed emotion. This suggests a broadly supportive home environment and relationships, likely predictive of more positive developmental/mental health outcomes for family members.

IDIOSYNCRATIC FMSS CASE EXAMPLE POTENTIALLY SIGNALLING NEED FOR ADDITIONAL OR SUSTAINED SUPPORT

When asked to speak about her son, Reyes, Angela started with a neutral initial statement which recognised his developmental delays. She occasionally used a warm tone of voice and laughter when describing his particular habits, including when sharing an anecdote of him running at a park. However, across the five minutes of speaking freely about Reyes, Angela made no clear positive comments and did make several critical comments about his behaviour and its impact on the family—particularly on his siblings. There was also evidence of negative quality to their parent-child relationship in some statements Angela made (e.g., expressing that they “butt heads together”). Overall, her speech sample was coded ‘high’ for expressed emotion. This can signal a home environment that is less harmonious and supportive of child development and family-member wellbeing, and might indicate benefit from additional, ongoing supports.

Across the families as a group, we looked to see if there was any evidence that how parents/carers described their children in the FMSS was linked to other personal parent/carer-, child-, or family characteristics, and found:

- Parents/carers whose children were currently undergoing formal diagnostic assessment generally made fewer positive comments about their children (i.e., average of just 2 such comments) than did those whose children had a confirmed diagnosis (i.e., average of 6 positive comments);
- Parents/carers who had a medical condition or identified some neurodivergence for themselves also tended to make more positive comments about their children (i.e., an average of 6 positive comments made by parents/carers with relevant lived experience of disability or difference), than those with no such personal lived experience (i.e., 1-2 positive comments, only).

Satisfaction Ratings were requested from parents/carers (on 10-point scale) for:

- How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?
- How satisfied are you with [Child’s] life as a whole?
- Do you believe you have all the skills you need to be a good parent to [Child]?
- How satisfied are you with your experience of PlayConnect+?

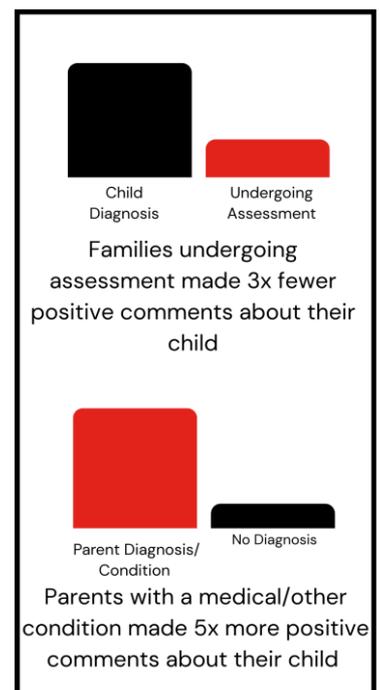


Figure 18. FMSS ratings linked to family circumstances

The parents/carers we spoke to generally rated their **own life satisfaction as high**, with average score = 8 (and most between 6 and 10, but three cases of low personal life satisfaction; ratings ≤ 4).

Similarly, parent/carer ratings of **satisfaction with life for their child** were generally **high**, with average = 8 (and most between 7 and 10, but four exceptions of parents/carers offering more *moderate* ratings here; of 5-6).

The parents/carers also generally rated their **belief in having the skills they need to be good parents** to their children **as fairly high**, with average = 7 (but widespread, from 5 to 10, and many claiming only *moderate* such belief).

We looked for any links between the various ratings parents/carers gave here, finding:

- Parent/carer satisfaction ratings for their own and their child’s life were somewhat linked (i.e., trend for relatively higher or lower scores on both; $r_s = .37$); and
- Parent/carer ratings of their own belief in their parenting skills were linked to both their personal life satisfaction ($r_s = .39$) and that for their child ($r_s = .43$).

So, to the extent parents/carers were satisfied with their own lives, they tended also to be satisfied with their child’s life, and believe in their effective parenting skills.

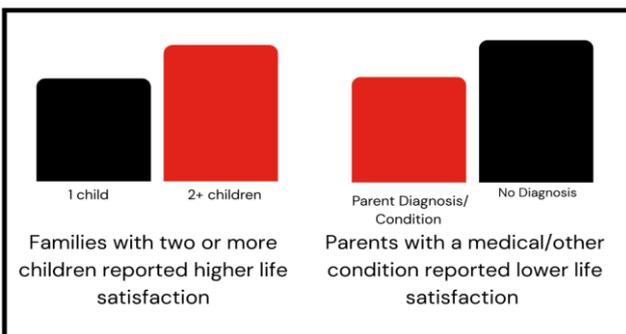


Fig. 20. Satisfaction linked to family situation

We looked for any evidence of links between these satisfaction ratings and other personal characteristics of parents/carers, children, or families, finding:

- Personal life satisfaction tended to be rated lower by parents/carers with some medical condition or neurodivergence (i.e., subgroup average = 6.3) compared to those with no such lived experience (average = 8.5);

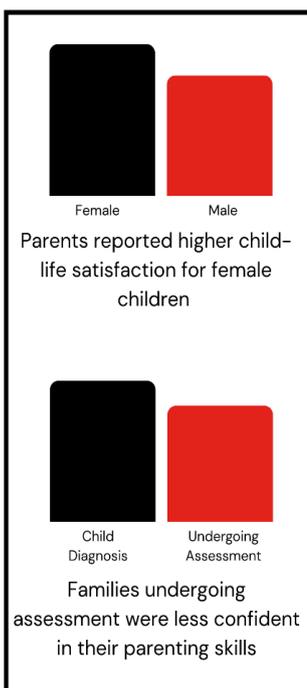


Fig. 21. Satisfaction linked to child features

- Parents/carers with one child in the family tended to rate their own life satisfaction as lower (subgroup average = 6.2; vs. those with two or more children, average = 8.1).
- Higher satisfaction ratings for children tended to be given:
 - For girls vs. boys (averages 8.5, 6.8), and for younger vs. older children ($r_s = .49$)
 - In families with more adult carers ($r = .44$) and living in relatively more socio-economically disadvantage areas ($r = -.50$)
- Parents/carers tended to rate stronger belief in their parenting skills, if:
 - Their child had a diagnosis (average = 7.9; vs. undergoing assessment = 6.5);
 - Living in a more socio-economically disadvantaged area ($r_s = .46$); or
 - Specifically living in a regional area (= 8.5) vs. Major City of Australia (= 7.1).

Over half of parents/carers indicated complete satisfaction with PlayConnect+ (10/10). Indeed almost all rated high satisfaction with PlayConnect+ (i.e., scores ≥ 8). The case of one single parent/carer offering a lower score is provided below. PlayConnect+ satisfaction was linked to own life satisfaction ($r_s = .44$) but no other factors, so may be seen as an equally highly satisfactory program by families in diverse circumstances.

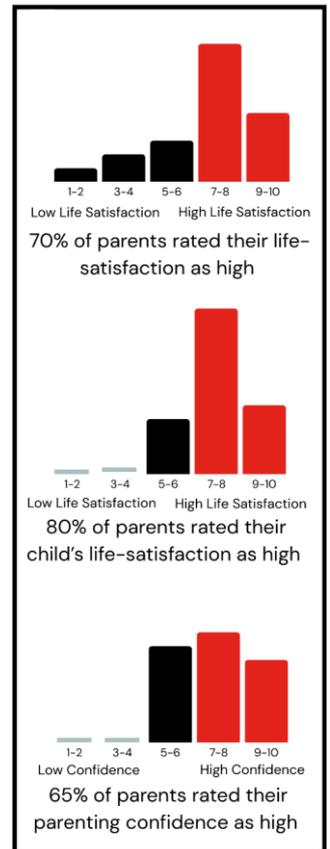


Fig. 19. Summary satisfaction ratings

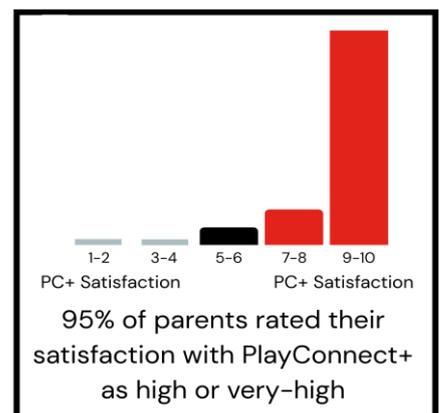


Fig. 22. Satisfaction with PlayConnect+

Qualitative Insights on Family Experiences of PlayConnect+

The substantive part of each family interview focused on parent/carer experiences with and impressions of PlayConnect+ (and other related services). Family interviews were transcribed and coded for analysis. As with our treatment of Staff interviews, our analysis of Family Experience interviews was with a view to addressing the overarching evaluation questions, but taking an inductive approach to identify themes arising in the interview data (i.e., new insights in the accounts shared directly by families, rather than simple answers to set questions).

Coding and preliminary analysis was led by one La Trobe University Researcher (Smith) who shared her impressions and draft themes with others in the broader research team. The analysis completed to date, from interviews with parents/carers from 20 families accessing PlayConnect+ across Australia, experiences and impressions converged around three themes each with subthemes:

- **Core Principles of PlayConnect+:** A service where acceptance, safety, flexibility and inclusivity are paramount;
- **Peer-to-Peer Support:** Supportive relationships developed for adults and children, from shared experiences; and
- **Access and Availability:** Parents/carers wish that it had been easier to find out about and join PlayConnect+, and for more and consistent sessions for all who might benefit.

These themes identified from the insights shared by parents/carers, are summarised in the following thematic map, and described in detail below with illustrative quotes (attributed to pseudonyms, and edited to protect child, parent/carer and family confidentiality by obscuring potentially identifying information).

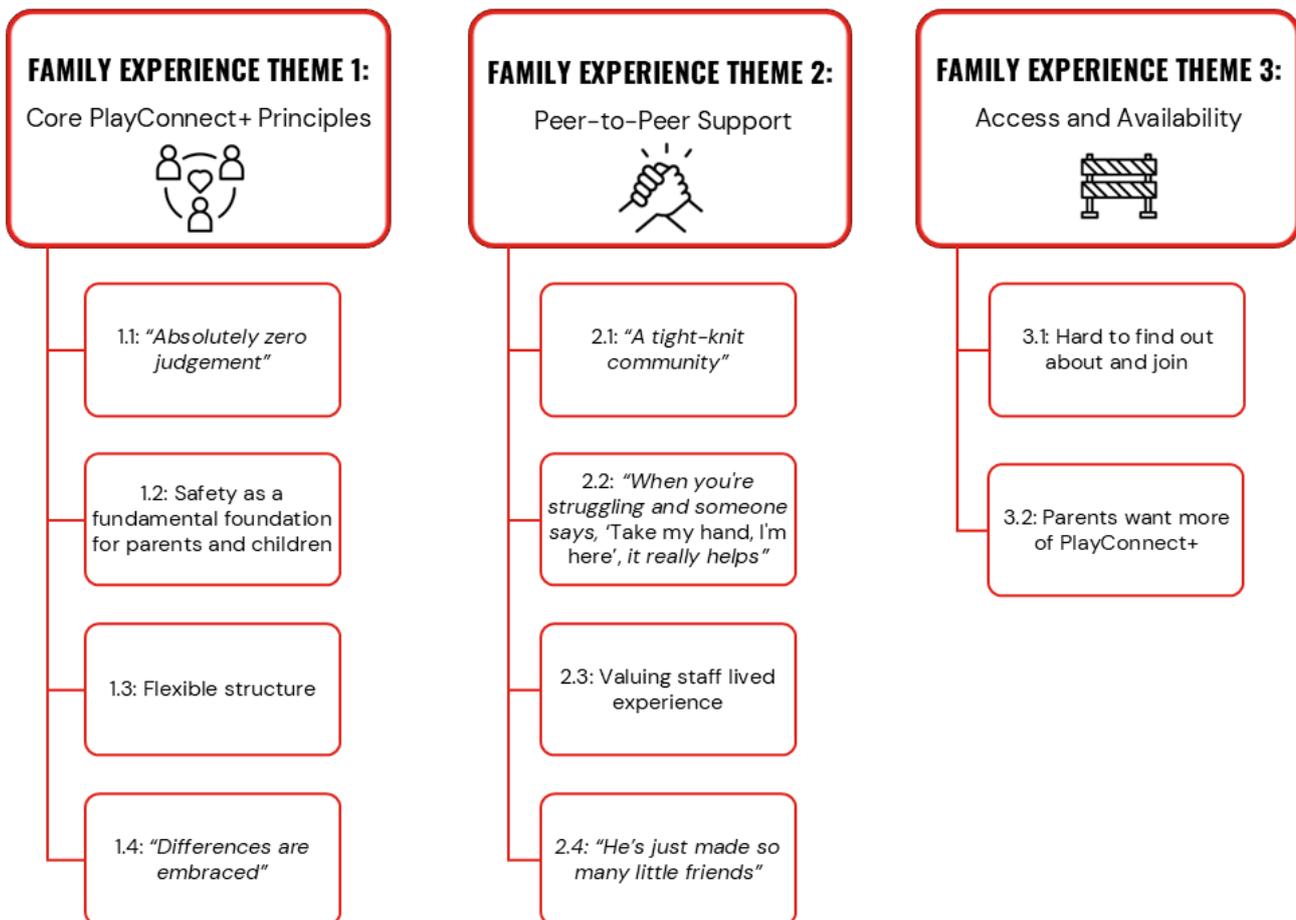


Figure 23. Summary thematic map of insights shared by 21 parents/carers (from 20 families) who participated in interviews.



FAMILY EXPERIENCE THEME 1: Core PlayConnect+ Principles

The parents/carers we spoke to clearly felt their PlayConnect+ playgroups were non-judgemental welcoming places—**“There is absolutely zero judgement there”** [Amalia, parent to 1.5-year-old] (Subtheme 1.1). This was apparent in broad comments—*“Going to PlayConnect+ was like home... you feel seen... you don't feel judged”* [Amalia]—and in statements offering direct comparison to other playgroups—*“We've been to so many playgroups [over the] years of having kids... [PlayConnect+] is the only one we've found welcoming enough, non-judgemental... everyone very friendly and happy to have a chat”* [Eleanor, parent to 3-year-old].

“Immediately we were accepted. Everyone was so friendly. Everyone talked to you. Everyone understood.” [Rita]

“[My Facilitator] has just been a light in a dark tunnel” [Amalia]

“We've been to so many playgroups [over the] years of having kids... [PlayConnect+] is the only one we've found welcoming enough, non-judgemental... everyone very friendly and happy to have a chat” [Eleanor]

Non-judgement was also attributed to the PlayConnect+ Staff—*“Wonderful... so welcoming, inclusive, very understanding, calm, patient”* [Wai, parent to 4-year-old], and *“It's like the facilitators have your back 110%... so supportive. [My Facilitator] has just been a light in a dark tunnel”* [Amalia]—and to other families—*“Immediately we were accepted. Everyone was so friendly. Everyone talked to you. Everyone understood”* [Rita, parent to 3-year-old].

Parents/carers also described **Safety as a fundamental foundation for parents and children** (Subtheme 1.2), where PlayConnect+ Staff prioritised ensuring all participants felt safe and secure. This was true for psychological felt safety—*“[PlayConnect+ is] a safe space where you can just be who you are, have fun the way you want to have fun”* [Deanne, parent to 6-year-old], and *“You know your child is safe, and you are safe, and that it's all going to be okay, because [the Staff have] got you”* [Amalia]. However, it was also reflected in parents/carers knowledge that their children were in an environment where they were physically safe to explore independently and learn with and from others. Amalia valued that *“Nell gets to just be herself in a safe space with no expectations”*, while another parent, Delia, elaborated:

“As a parent, it's nice to watch Sasha step away from me [at PlayConnect+]. He is quite clingy... so it's a nice feeling that he can go have a shared experience with [Facilitator]... a story, jumping on the trampoline, playing in the sand... nice that he can [do that and] feels safe.” [Delia, parent to 2-year-old]

Parents/carers also valued the **Flexible structure** (Subtheme 1.3) PlayConnect+ staff offered; the predictability across sessions—*“The kids have their structure and routine, and they go [to PlayConnect+] knowing what will happen and what's next, and it just makes the world of difference”* [Amalia]—but also the lack of pressure to engage in any particular activity—*“The structure works really well, and you can choose whether or not to participate”* [Erica, parent to 2-year-old]. Here, one interviewee, Wai, directly contrasted PlayConnect+ with other settings:

“I've known a lot of educators who will be like ‘This is how we do things... and we are doing Song Time now, and it is Circle Time now, and that's what's happening’... and just not listening to when children [are expressing] ‘I'm overwhelmed... I can't do Song Time right now... I don't want to’. [Our PlayConnect+ Facilitator] will make it an option... ‘We are doing this now... we are over here... [but] if you don't want to, that's okay’.”

Parents/carers also described how **“Differences are embraced”** [Amalia] (Subtheme 1.4) at PlayConnect+, illustrating this both for children and for parents/carers. Again, this seemed to characterise the Staff—*“...instead of putting [children] in a box... that's not what [Facilitator] does... she sees each kid as an individual [which is] all I can ask for”* [Loren, parent to 3-year-old], and *“[The staff] came and greeted [my Child] and pretty much started calling him ‘Friend’ straight away... maybe that... ‘clicked’ in his head: ‘Hey, these people are nice... I'm accepted here’”* [Angela, parent to 4-year old]—but equally reflecting the groups in general—*“I feel Jose [can] be his true, authentic self... be celebrated for exactly who he is”* [Sara] and *“[my PlayConnect+] group is... probably the first meaningfully inclusive place I've been in...”* [Deanna].

“[my PlayConnect+] group is... probably the first meaningfully inclusive place I've been in” [Deanna]

“I feel Jose [can]... be his true, authentic self... celebrated for exactly who he is” [Sara]



FAMILY EXPERIENCE THEME 2: Peer-to-Peer Support

Accounts shared by parents/carers gave the impression **“We’re kind of like a tight-knit community”** [Belinda, parent to 2-year-old] (Subtheme 2.1), where families valued the genuine connections they made: *“I’ve met some really amazing families... connected with [people] who get me on a whole different level... [Few] other people understand what we’re going through, what we’ve been through, and these other parents [at PlayConnect+] just get it”* [Carly, parent to 4-year-old]. Moreover, beyond the support they felt they received from others, some parents/carers also described valuing the ability they had through PlayConnect+ to pass forward support to others, in similar situations:

“I’ve met some really amazing families... connected with [people] who get me on a whole different level...” [Carly]

“I really enjoy being able to meet new families and say, ‘Hey, just ask me whatever’. And they’ll ask questions like ‘Okay, so what does “Level 1 Autism” mean? What is the NDIS? What do I...? What do these things mean? Do I need to take her to a paediatrician?... Those are conversations I really enjoy having. Because when I was at the beginning of [my journey], they were conversations I needed someone to have with me.” [Eileen, parent to 3-year-old]

Parents/carers who we spoke to also expressed great appreciation for the efforts and manner of their PlayConnect+ group Staff. Amalia’s quote **“When you’re struggling and someone says, ‘Take my hand, I’m here’, it really helps”** (Subtheme 2.2) encapsulates the sentiment shared by many parents/carers into the value they placed in efforts by Facilitators and Assistants to find out about and share information—about services that would benefit the children, and thereby support the parents/carers and family units in their groups. Another parent, Deanna, shared:

“[I’ve heard about] Occupational Therapy, Speech Therapy... [PlayConnect+ Staff] even let us know when the local community health centre opened up their [service enrolment] list... that was [shared with] everyone, just so we knew what’s available... even helped with school”

Indeed, PlayConnect+ Staff were regularly described as being actively helpful, proactively seeking to connect with and engage families with local services, and doing so in very practical and thoughtful ways. Deanna explained further:

“Even before [I started regularly] going [to PlayConnect+, my Facilitator] was helping... linking me in with services, different school options... more resourceful than the [other therapist] we had at the time... a real help... having that pool of knowledge in the people we see [at PlayConnect+]”

That families valued in PlayConnect+ staff extended further—to **Valuing staff lived-experience** (Subtheme 2.3)—resonating with Coordinator/Manager had also told us in Staff Interviews (described earlier). That is, parents/carers felt a key contributor to the effectiveness and sensitivity of staff in Facilitator/Assistant roles was that they had often had similar personal life experiences. Amalia commented *“[Many Facilitators are] walking the same path as you because they’ve got kids with disabilities; it just really, really helps”*, and Deanna expanded:

“[Many Facilitators are] walking the same path as you because they’ve got kids with disabilities; it just really, really helps [Amalia]”

“Never underestimate how much knowledge a Mum with a kid with a disability has about services and what’s around... including the PlayConnect+ Facilitators... That they are [often parents] themselves with older kids [with disabilities]. I don’t know if that’s intentional... but it’s pretty good to have Facilitators who have been on your journey... know what supports are out there.” [Deanna]

The experiences parents/carers shared also illustrated how meaningful peer-to-peer connections were not limited to those made by the adults in the groups. They described how PlayConnect+ supported children to connect together: **“He’s just made so many little friends”** [Rita] (Subtheme 2.4). Parents/caregivers descriptions showed they treasured seeing their children learn to interact and socialise together—*“[They] grow comfortable enough [over time] that they can do side-by-side play, and they can acknowledge one another and interact that way... that’s more than you can ever hope for.”* [Wai].

“He’s just made so many little friends” [Rita]

Here, again, some parents/carers made direct comparison to what their children had experienced in other settings, such as Eleanor who shared:

“Alma actually made a little friend at [PlayConnect+] now too... all by herself. And it speaks volumes for us, because she’s been going to childcare for 2 years on her own and not made a friend [there] yet.”



FAMILY EXPERIENCE THEME 3: Access and Availability

"I wouldn't have known about [PlayConnect+], really, if [another local service] hadn't messaged, e-mailed me [about it]" [Carly]

Whilst reporting how much they valued and felt they benefited from PlayConnect+, some parents/carers we spoke to also lamented how the program had been **Hard to find out about and join** (Subtheme 3.1). Parents/carers variously described initial difficulty with knowing how to get involved—"I wasn't sure how to join. I was trying to email and... then I think eventually I just showed up." [Rita]—or even about finding out about the program in the first place—"I wouldn't have known about [PlayConnect+], really, if [another local service] hadn't messaged, e-mailed me [about it]" [Carly]. Wai described:

"It was rather hard to find PlayConnect+. I had no idea there were inclusive playgroups. Where are they? How do we find them? I don't know if it's just advertising, but I believe a lot more people would come if they knew [PlayConnect+] even existed."

Having found a PlayConnect+ group, one parent/carer—Deanna—described clear logistic barriers to getting involved, which ultimately did not deter her and her family from participating, but she reflected that this might present an insurmountable challenge for other families:

"I had a 5-page form to fill out. It took me days. I think I ended up... having to email [the organisation]. In fact, [PlayConnect+ Staff] called me up and said, 'Oh, do you remember the form that we gave you the other day?'. So, there was a lot of paperwork... Not that I'm complaining. It's just protocol, I guess."

Notwithstanding these difficulties related to awareness and access, the perceived value of the program was also evident in many descriptions from parents/carers highlighting that **Parents want more of PlayConnect+** (Subtheme 3.2). The parents/carers we spoke to variously proposed the need for, and potential benefit of, additional groups in their regions—"Having more sessions or more groups... would be good... I mean, I would go [to PlayConnect+] every day [if it was an option]" [Rita]—or of longer session durations—"Sometimes, the sessions feel so short... Maybe longer sessions [would be good]" [Myra]. Echoing insights we heard from Staff Interviews, Sara commented on the issue of consistent scheduling across the year:

"Having more sessions or more groups... would be good... I mean, I would go [to PlayConnect+] every day [if it was an option]" [Rita]

"I finally found something that's just so suitable... just ticks all the boxes... but then we've got an age limit [that will prevent us from continuing]" [Deanna]

"It would be great if [the regular PlayConnect+ group] ran through the [school] holidays as well as [during] terms... Jose, with his autism, likes continuity, likes routine, likes regularity. And having the [school holiday] break [from PlayConnect+] throws things a bit."

Relatedly, the upper limit of child age 8-years was raised by some parents as constraining. For example, Deanna lamented "I finally found something that's just so suitable... ticks all the boxes... but then we've got an age limit [that will prevent us from continuing]" [Deanna]. For others, questions around the upper age limit were raised, as this was seen as something that could preclude participation by children who might indeed be *chronologically older* than the intended target group (i.e., above 8 years), but *functioning* at such a

level that they might still stand to benefit from PlayConnect+. Furthermore, for other families, this age-related constraint was flagged as relevant where a 'target' child aged under 8 might have older siblings who would also need to be able to come along in order for the younger sibling and parent/carer to be able to attend PlayConnect+ sessions.—"I know several parents from my MyTime group who, because of their older children's disabilities, have to home school. And they say, I'd really love to be able to take my younger kids to PlayConnect+, but I can't [go because I would need to also] take my older children [who] are over the age of eight" [Eileen].

"I know several parents from my MyTime group who... [would] really love to be able to take [their] younger kids to PlayConnect+, but can't [go because they would need to also] take... older children... over the age of eight" [Eileen]



FAMILY EXPERIENCES: Stories of Change

Parents/carers spontaneously shared stories of change during our interviews, illustrating the perceived benefits of participation in PlayConnect+ for themselves, for their children, and for their family units. Here, we share a case series illustrating the experiences of selected families we spoke to that serve to highlighting key findings we have presented in summary elsewhere across this report, showcasing the perceived benefits and effective features of PlayConnect+.

CASE EXAMPLE OF PlayConnect+ PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN

Sara has attended PlayConnect+ sessions with her 4-year-old, Jose, for about 2 years, since his autism was first diagnosed. They attend weekly and she describes their *"time at PlayConnect+ [as] life changing"* including having brought direct benefits for Jose, who initially *"couldn't tolerate being around other people... [but] now engages in the activities [and] is really happy in the space."* Sara believes the benefits from PlayConnect+ have extended to other settings—including childcare—and are supporting Jose's transition to school *"which... has been a lot smoother than we thought"*. She also shared how she was initially *"in a bad place with the whole diagnosis"* but now describes Jose's *"autism [as] part of why we love him"* and *"even though he doesn't speak... he shows his love in lots of different ways"*, reflecting a very positive parent-child relationship. Sara rated satisfaction with her own life and for Jose as reasonably high (8 and 7/10) and expressed complete satisfaction with her PlayConnect+ experience (10/10).

CASE EXAMPLE OF PlayConnect+ PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR PARENTS/CARERS

Amalia began attending PlayConnect+ only recently, with her <2-year-old toddler Nell, who has complex developmental and medical needs. Amalia also identified her own related lived experience and described feeling different and judged at mainstream Playgroups: *"I [would] see the [other] parents looking at me... and asking me how old Nell was. There [was] just so much judgment"*. By contrast, she found *"PlayConnect+ was like 'home', you know... absolutely zero judgment there"* and spoke about valuing how the *"the Facilitators have [your] back 110% and are just so supportive"* including providing information to help connect her with other services. But what she seemed to really value most was their personal support during a challenging time, expressing *"When you're struggling and someone holds out their hand and says, 'Take my hand, I'm here', it really helps"*. That Facilitators often had lived experience was important to Amalia, who saw staff *"put everything into their work... their hearts are just completely in it"*, contributed to her felt safety—*"you know your child is safe, and you are safe, and that it's all going to be okay, because they've got you"*. Amalia rated her own and Nell's life satisfaction as high, as well as her satisfaction with PlayConnect+ (9 or 10/10).

CASE EXAMPLE OF PlayConnect+ AS OFFERING A WELCOMING, INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

Eleanor attends PlayConnect+ with her 3-year-old daughter Alma, who experiences anxiety and sensory sensitivities. Eleanor feels the PlayConnect+ environment suits Alma well *"because she needs fewer people and less noise [around her]... it's less overwhelming"* and explains how the calm PlayConnect+ setting means Alma doesn't have meltdowns or become aggressive, unlike what sometimes happens in other settings. Eleanor and Alma try to attend their group regularly. They rarely miss a week, and Alma *"misses it, you know. She will ask for it"*. Moreover, Eleanor describes social benefits for Alma, who has *"actually made a little friend at PlayConnect+... all by herself!"*. Eleanor also feels she benefits personally from the environment, *"enjoying seeing Alma happy... [and not] having to stress"* about other parents potentially judging them. Indeed, they have previously attended other playgroups, and Eleanor expressed *"this is the only [playgroup] we have found that has been welcoming... and non-judgemental"*. Eleanor rated satisfaction for her own life and for Alma's as high (both 8/10) and expressed complete satisfaction with PlayConnect+ (10/10).

EXAMPLE OF HOW PlayConnect+ SUPPORTS FAMILIES IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

Deanna and 6-year-old Reid attend several PlayConnect+ groups. Reid is autistic, and Deanna describes herself and Reid's dad as neurodivergent with additional medical and mental health conditions. She shared how *"it's hard to connect with the community"* as *"the world [is not] this beautiful inclusive place where we are open to different ways of communication"*, but also the counterpoint of PlayConnect+ as *"the first meaningfully inclusive place I've actually been in"*. Deanna also describes having seen a meaningful change in Reid since they joined PlayConnect+ several months ago, and attributes this to *"[him] work[ing] out that this is a safe place, and [that] he wasn't isolated... so little bit by little bit [he has engaged and] now he participates in the whole program"*. Deanna also values the peer-support she gets from the PlayConnect+ Facilitators and other parents with lived experience, advocating *"never underestimate how much knowledge a Mum of a kid with a disability has about services and what's around..."* and reflecting that *"there's something nice being a parent dealing with another Mum who's more experienced than you"*. Reflecting on her current circumstances, including comments suggesting she was experiencing substantial stress and life changes, Deanna rated satisfaction for her own life and Reid's as low to moderate (4 and 5/10), but expressed somewhat higher confidence in her skills to parent him (6/10) whereas her rating of satisfaction with PlayConnect+ was very high (9.5/10), suggesting this program is offering excellent, much needed support.

CASE EXAMPLE OF EFFECTIVE SUPPORT THROUGH PlayConnect+ ONLINE PLAYGROUP

Myra has been attending an Online PlayConnect+ playgroup for several months with 3-year-old, Marco. She explains *"it's a small, but really lovely group of kids"*, and that she and Marco enjoy the group activities: *"We love the songs [and] listening to the stories... [and the online PlayConnect+ playgroup] gives us ideas for things to do [at home]"*. But the biggest benefit she feels is for them *"to be able to connect... it's just that interaction with people who know you and who you see on a week-to-week basis"*. Myra shared that the Online playgroup format suits their family situation as—given Marco's additional needs—*"it takes [us] a lot to get out of the house"* and they have limited other opportunities to engage with other parents and children. So PlayConnect+ Online playgroup sessions provide Myra and Marco exactly *"what we want from a play group..."*, an accessible way to have *"real, live interaction... it's such a great space and just really welcoming... a safe space and safe group to be part of"*. In the context of challenges he is experiencing, Myra rated her own life satisfaction as moderate (i.e., 7/10) and her satisfaction with Marco's life as low (i.e., 5/10). By contrast, she expressed complete satisfaction with her experience of PlayConnect+ (10/10).

CASE EXAMPLE OF VALUED SUPPORT THROUGH PlayConnect+ SING & GROW MUSIC THERAPY

Erica attends several PlayConnect+ groups with her toddler, Lily, including a standard Face-to-Face playgroup but also a Sing & Grow Music Therapy playgroup. Erica explained that she has no specific concerns for Lily's development at this stage, but is Autistic herself and so knows it is likely Lily may also have autism or other neurodivergence. Among the various groups and other services she attends, Erica feels Lily's development is most benefitted by participation in the PlayConnect+ Sing & Grow Music Therapy playgroup. Erica describes *"Sing & Grow is amazing... I love the concept..."* including perceiving that Lily is *"not only learning about music, but I think it is also good for [her] language development... connecting words to actions... [and] maths [concepts]... in terms of timing and counting"*. She shared her joy in a specific change for Lily who *"sung the whole Twinkle, Twinkle song..."*, sharing *"I was really impressed, because she's only saying two-word sentences right now, and then she sang the whole song... she learned the word 'guitar'... there's certain vocabulary [that]... she wouldn't [otherwise] have, so [that is] great."* Erica rated her overall satisfaction with PlayConnect+ as moderate (6/10), explaining that she is not *dissatisfied* with other aspects but prefers Sing & Grow sessions to the other parts of the program, as well as to the more structured set-up and activities on offer at another community playgroup they attend.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

Broad Approach

This report describes an evaluation of PlayConnect+ (2023-2025) led by researchers at La Trobe University (the Childhood Autism and Parenting Team), as a key deliverable of service agreement with Autism Queensland leading PlayConnect+ delivery with the national consortium of State and Territory Playgroup Organisations. Further to provision of support around item selection and data collection processes for Standard Client/Community Outcome Reporting (SCORE) activities, and regular participation and input at Steering Committee, Working Group and Community of Practice meetings, and into 6-monthly Activity Work Plan reporting, we completed two primary studies:

- A series of in-depth interviews with PlayConnect+ staff working in regional, local and national delivery roles; and
- A series of in-depth ‘telehealth clinical consultation’ type interviews with 21 parents/carers (from 20 families) representing all States and Territories and engaged with PlayConnect+ for various periods of time (from months to years), primarily through the main face-to-face format (but with some online-, school holiday-, and music therapy playgroup experiences), and varied in terms of socio-cultural background and specific support needs.

These two evaluation activities were prioritised among other options outlined in an initial evaluation plan, with a view to prioritising researcher efforts and resources toward activities considered feasible (and approved by our La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee [LTU HREC]), and likely to add greatest value to the other data collection and reporting requirements of the Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services (DSS) for PlayConnect+ delivery (through the National Early Childhood Program (NECP) *Support for Children* activity funding).

Summary of Findings from Staff including Local Group Leads

Who PlayConnect+ Serves

Our qualitative analysis of first-round interviews with staff—working in any role and across a range of localities—offered insights into the types of children and families PlayConnect+ was engaging at around NECP mid-point. As summarised in our Staff Insights Thematic Map, and illustrated through participant quotes (Section 5), we heard from 34 staff interviewed here about Who PlayConnect+ Serves (Staff Insights [SI] Theme 1); including *Children with Various Presentations of Autism* (SI Subtheme 1.1) and *Children with Diverse Medical, Developmental and Behavioural Needs* (SI Subtheme 1.2), as well as a range of *Families with Non-Specific Concerns for their Children* (SI Subtheme 1.3) and *Families with Diverse Support Needs for Other Members or the Family Unit* (SI Subtheme 1.4), all engaged and participating in PlayConnect+ groups. These descriptions converged broadly with specified goals and target groups of NECP *Support for Children*, suggesting PlayConnect+ was effectively engaging families, as intended, in relation to child disability/developmental concerns and diverse family support needs (illustrated in Figure 24, below).

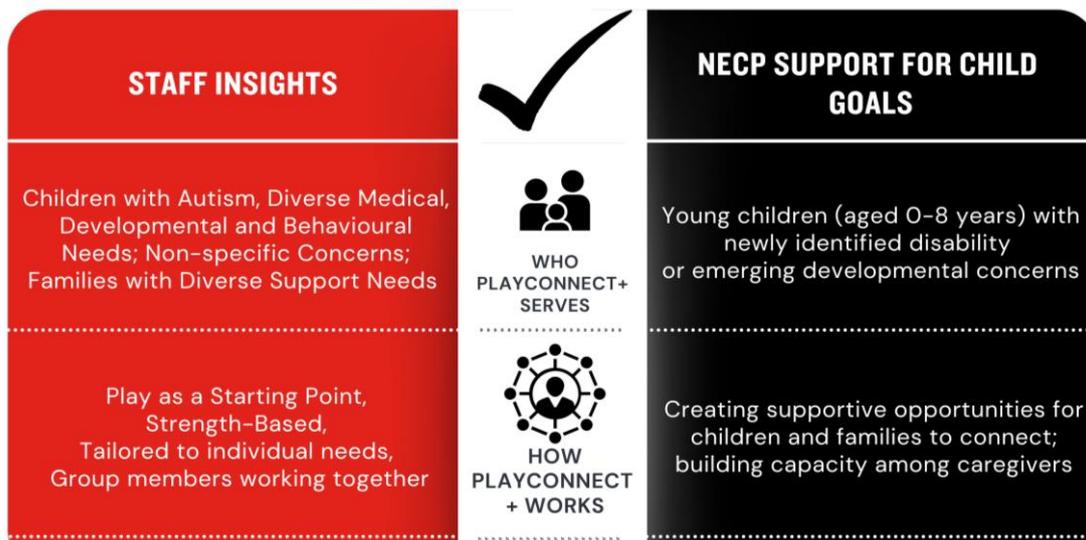


Fig. 24. Staff insights on PlayConnect+ operational alignment to NECP *Support for Children* goals

How PlayConnect+ Works

We also gained insight into how the program works—not simply around meeting contractual requirements or following a particular curriculum or activity set, but rather with staff conveying what we might see as the foundational or ‘active ingredients’ of PlayConnect+ in offering a supportive setting and experience for families. From the initial 34 staff interviews in earlier 2024, and with clarification at follow-up interview with 17 Facilitators/Assistants later that year, we understood that *How PlayConnect+ Works* (Staff Insights [SI] Theme 2) is from *Play as the Starting Point* (SI Subtheme 2.1). That is, play offers a low-demand way to foster family attendance and engagement, and a positive initial experience from which other activities could be established and benefits ultimately flow.

From *Play as the Starting Point* (SI Subtheme 2.1) we then understood key ingredients of PlayConnect+ to include a *Strengths-Based Approach* (SI Subtheme 2.2) and an inherently *Tailored Experience* (SI Subtheme 2.3). Group staff draw on and celebrate strengths, and ensure the personal needs of individuals (children-, parents/carers-, and family units) are understood and met through their participation.

We heard about how PlayConnect+ works through *Staff and Families Sharing Experiences and Responsibilities* (SI Subtheme 2.4), including some illustration in direct contrast with experiences at other community playgroups and in therapeutic services (i.e., where staff and parents/carers may have different priorities from one another, or may take on distinct roles within sessions). Moreover, we also heard that PlayConnect+ is inherently *Collaborative: Group Members Working Together* (SI Subtheme 2.5), with equal staff-family status fostering parental empowerment. Again, this presented as distinct from the power imbalance described in other settings—where staff might assume the role of ‘teacher’ or ‘respite worker’—whether or not intentionally so. Again, these insights from staff on the foundations of *How PlayConnect+ Works* suggests strong programmatic alignment with NECP *Support for Children* goals of creating supportive opportunities for child and family connection, and parent/carer capacity building, adapted for local need.

Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+

Further informing how PlayConnect+ works to benefit the children-, parents/carers, and families it serves—and here, abstracted further still from the foundations or ‘active ingredients’ of the program—insights shared by staff coalesced around what have interpreted to be four *Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+* (SI Theme 3).

First here, staff highlighted the multi-level importance of *Consistency: of Sessions, Groups and the Program* (SI Subtheme 3.1), sharing illustrative accounts of how *lack of consistency* has important but potentially under-recognised impacts on family engagement (i.e., whether in finding out about the program, joining a PlayConnect+ group, and/or remaining engaged over time). While the importance of consistency was perhaps only more *implicitly* recognised by families themselves, staff acknowledged this factor *explicitly*, and moreover noted it was difficult to achieve (e.g., in the context of security of program funding, meeting local resourcing requirements, etc.).

A second Core Value also explicitly evident in accounts shared by staff was for *Non-Judgement: Families Feel Safe* (SI Subtheme 3.2). Like *Consistency*, *Non-Judgement* was also advocated as critical to any other efforts to engage and retain families with PlayConnect+, and thereby secure the potential to effectively support them. However, unlike the case for *Consistency*, the strong conviction for *Non-Judgement: Families Feel Safe* was equally *explicitly* recognised by families (e.g., Family Experience Subthemes 1.1, 1.2). Moreover—unlike *Consistency* which was highly valued but difficult to achieve—*Non-Judgement* was something staff seemed to foster with ease.

A third Core Value we initially identified in staff interviews—*Families First*—we later separated into two points following clarifying discussion with group Facilitators/Assistants. Here, *Families Decide* (SI Subtheme 3.3) summarises the range of efforts by staff with the common goal of empowering families, and the recognition that any action otherwise would risk their sustained engagement and thereby undermine any and all other program objectives. Relatedly, *Trust is Earned* (SI Subtheme 3.4) was expressed in the varied staff descriptions highlighting how building relationships with vulnerable families takes time, and here again, staff described how any attempts to force or expedite building trust could risk other efforts to effectively support families, through PlayConnect+.

PlayConnect+ group Facilitators/Assistants described their on-the-ground efforts to empower families in these ways. However, we also heard during Coordinator/Manager follow-up interviews (in May 2025), and from families directly how a strong contributing factor to building trust likely came from the lived-experience many staff brought to their PlayConnect+ role/s (e.g., Family Experience Subtheme 2.3). Indeed, the personal lived-experience of staff may explain the apparent effortlessness of staff holding these Core Values for PlayConnect+. However, staff also shared some ways that putting families first could present a challenge (such as when striving to meet contract requirements for both session delivery and data collection/reporting) or require efforts beyond their current levels of confidence (e.g., to build trust quickly in order to address complex parent/carer support needs) and with limited time/resources.

Summary of Findings on Family Experiences with PlayConnect+

Our Family Experience interviews (conducted over a ~12 month period from early/mid 2024 through 2025) were independent from our staff interviews, but revealed points of striking consistency in parent/carer experiences of PlayConnect+ and staff accounts of their efforts to create effective supportive spaces (summarised in Fig. 25 below).

Family Experiences Echoing the Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+

As summarised in the Thematic Map on Family Experiences and illustrated through parent/carer quotes (Section 6), we heard four *Core PlayConnect+ Principles* (Family Experience [FE] Theme 1) some of which corresponded clearly to the *Core Values at the Heart of PlayConnect+* illustrated by staff. Points of convergence included families' experience of "*Absolutely Zero Judgement*" (FE Subtheme 1.1) within PlayConnect+, and *Safety as a Fundamental Foundation* (FE Subtheme 1.2; i.e., echoing and expanding SI Subtheme 3.2, *Non-Judgement: Families Feel Safe*).

Conversely, parent/carer appreciation of *Flexible Structure* (FE Subtheme 1.3) seemed distinct from the Core Value of *Consistency* highlighted by staff (SI Subtheme 3.1). Yet, on closer inspection, the *Flexible Structure* families highlighted seems to encapsulate session-to-session predictability (i.e., consistency) coupled with an absence of pressure to engage in any particular way—a deliberate intention set by staff (and aligned with the Core Values *Families Decide* and *Trust is Earned*; SI Subthemes 3.3, 3.4).

Parents/carers conveyed gratitude in "*Differences are Embraced*" (FE Subtheme 1.4), expressed distinctly from, but aligned with, the aforementioned principle of "*Absolutely Zero Judgement*" (FE Subtheme 1.1) and also with Core Values from staff of *Families Decide* and *Trust is Earned* (SI Subthemes 3.3, 3.4). Moreover, along with the *Strengths-Based Approach* and *Tailored Experience* (SI Subthemes 2.2, 2.3), the Core Values held by staff evidently manifest to families that PlayConnect+ is somewhere "*Differences are Embraced*" and one can be one's authentic self.

Parent/Carer Illustrations of Effective Peer-to-Peer Support

Much of what parents/carers shared in their interviews conveyed the clear ways they benefitted from PlayConnect+ through *Peer-to-Peer Support* (FE Theme 2). They described various ways the program offered the occasion and safe space to connect with others in similar circumstances.

Broadly speaking, families described experiencing their PlayConnect+ groups as "*A Tight-Knit Community*" (FE Subtheme 2.1), resonating with staff insights that PlayConnect+ works as *Collaborative: Group Members Working Together* (SI Subtheme 2.5). More specifically, parents/carers conveyed strong appreciation for staff, both in terms of being available and effective—"*When You're Struggling and Someone Says, 'Take my Hand, I'm Here', It Really Helps*" (FE Subtheme 2.2)—and also expressly *Valuing Staff Lived Experience* (FE Subtheme 2.3; here, something families recognised but seemed unsure whether was purposeful or coincidental). Resonating with staff insights on PlayConnect+ as *Collaborative...* and involving *Staff and Families Sharing Experiences and Responsibilities* (SI Subthemes 2.5, 2.4), parents/carers shared their appreciation of staff taking care to meet each family where they were at, responding accordingly, and drawing on their own lived experience (possibly key to their effectiveness here).

Whilst highlighting the perceived value of adult peer-to-peer support, parents/carers also shared experiences of meaningful child-to-child connections through PlayConnect+—"*He's just made so many little friends*" (FE Subtheme 2.4). Examples offered here resonated with staff insights on PlayConnect+ working via *Play as the Starting Point* (SI Subtheme 2.1) and the principles of "*Absolutely Zero Judgement*" (FE Subtheme 1.1) and "*Differences are embraced*" (FE Subtheme 1.4), with some direct contrast of positive connections at PlayConnect+ vs. limited success elsewhere.

A Strong Desire for More

Whilst strongly conveying their value for and perceived benefits from PlayConnect+, families also conveyed *Access and Availability* issues (FE Theme 3). Some lamented that it had been *Hard to Find out About and Join* (FE Subtheme 3.1) PlayConnect+. We also regularly heard *Parents Want More of PlayConnect+* (FE Subtheme 3.2)—whether through more groups, longer sessions, and/or greater continuity across the year, each advocated as ways to better meet family need for continuity of support and connection (echoing and expanding the Core Value of *Consistency: of Sessions, Groups and the Program* expressed by staff; SI Subtheme 3.1). Relevant here too, some families raised the necessity and appropriateness of an 8-year upper child age limit for participation eligibility.

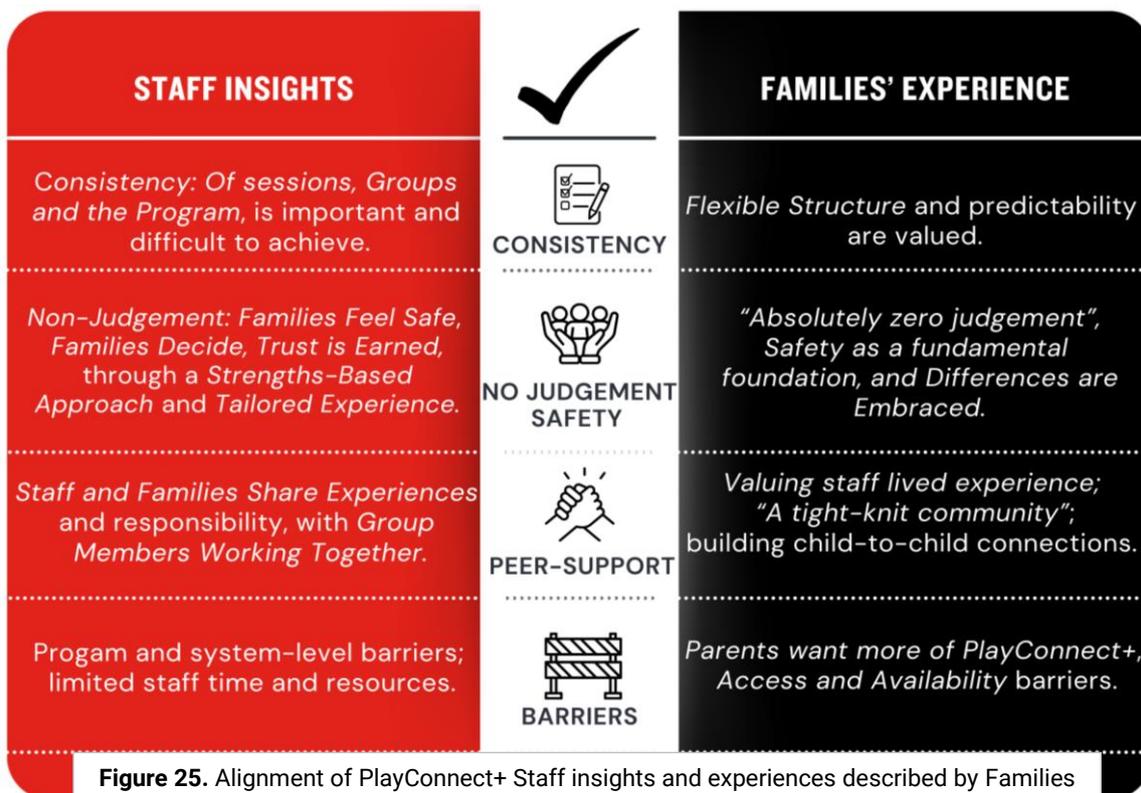


Figure 25. Alignment of PlayConnect+ Staff insights and experiences described by Families

Additional Context of Family Experience Interview Participants

The primary focus of our interviews with families, was on parent/carer experiences of PlayConnect+. However, these 'telehealth clinical consultation' type sessions also afforded the chance to collect other contextualising information; including an initial 'get-to-know-you' activity when parents/carers spoke freely about their child and family (i.e., Five Minute Speech Sample) and later (after hearing about PlayConnect+ experiences) seeking parent/carer Satisfaction Ratings on aspects of their lives and PlayConnect+ (on a 10-point scale; from 1 = 'Not at All' to 10 = 'Completely'). In most cases, we were also able to meet children on camera, observing parent-child free-play and snack time activities.

Indicators from the structured Five Minute Speech Sample suggested most parent-child dyads were getting along well. However, in around a quarter of cases, a more 'idiosyncratic' picture was presented, such as might signal risk of adverse later-life outcomes (and thereby higher current support needs for the dyad or family). For instance, some parents made several critical remarks about their children, conveyed limited sense of warmth, and/or implied a particularly taxing (i.e., negative-rated) parent-child relationship. While small sample size precludes us from drawing strong conclusions here, we note the more 'idiosyncratic' cases tended to be for children undergoing assessment (vs. more positive picture of relationship painted for children with a confirmed diagnosis) and/or parents/carers with no personal related lived experience (vs. more positive picture painted by those also with disability/neurodivergence).

Most parents/carers gave 'high' life satisfaction ratings for themselves and for their children (albeit with some 'moderate' and 'low' ratings in the group), and signalled strong belief in having the skills they need to be good parents to their children (though again with spread of scores including some only moderately confidently so). By contrast, almost all parents/carers we spoke to offered 'high' satisfaction ratings for their experience of PlayConnect+ (≥8/10); indeed, over half of the sample indicated complete satisfaction with their experience of the program (10/10).

We drew together these quantitative family relationship- and life satisfaction ratings, and other family characteristics, with the descriptions of PlayConnect+ experiences parents/carers shared with us, to present six case studies offering some additional illustration of the ways PlayConnect+ seems to be effectively:

- Serving families by providing *Support for Children*, and *Support for Parents/Carers*;
- Offering *A Welcoming, Inclusive Environment*, and specifically *Supporting Families in Difficult Circumstances*; and through specific examples of perceived:
- *Effective Support via PlayConnect+ Online-*, and *Valued Support from Sing & Grow Music Therapy playgroups*.

Additional Insights from Staff in Program Leadership Roles

Our timing of follow-up interviews with Coordinators and Managers offered the chance for reflection on program function toward the end of the original NECP funding period, and some forward-looking discussion (i.e., in the context that an additional 2-year NECP funding extension had recently been announced).

Further Reflection on Family Engagement

When asked about family engagement across the program to date, Coordinators/Managers shared the consistent impression of substantial recent growth in community demand for PlayConnect+, and also (possibly relatedly) of a somewhat changing profile of children. These factors—growth and diversification—were both viewed as positive. Yet staff also acknowledged these presented new (or perhaps highlighted existing) challenges to program delivery and family retention. Coordinators/Managers advocated the need for sustained and appropriately indexed funding, and for continued efforts toward partnership development and cross-system alignment, to meet community need.

In our family interviews, we heard directly from some parents/carers identifying First Nations family backgrounds, and from many families with cultural/ethnic diversity backgrounds (but only few reporting home use of languages other than English). Given fairly limited direct representation, we sought additional insights on Coordinator/Manager experiences of engaging families from First Nations and Cultural and Linguistic Diversity (CALD) backgrounds. These staff confirmed that their organisations and local sites were seeing engagement and participation from such families. However, they also conveyed variable confidence in capacity to effectively serve these families—whether at programmatic-, organisational-, or local group levels of delivery, or in terms of the confidence of individual staff to offer effective service for these families. These staff shared ideas about potential barriers to full participation from First Nations and CALD families—subgroups with potentially complex, intersecting needs (e.g., around trust and disclosure within community and to government). Indeed, Coordinators/Managers advocated for ongoing efforts to reach and maximise participation from families in these known underrepresented groups—such as through local partnership development and cross-system coordinated effort—and for staff capacity and confidence building.

Speaking more broadly, Coordinators/Managers expressed concern that, at current capacity, PlayConnect+ was barely 'scratching the surface' of community need. Beyond making the case for increased, stable program funding, and the sustained effort needed to reach known underrepresented groups, they raised the point that PlayConnect+ might be further diversified (e.g., through mobile service delivery) for even more widespread family outreach.

Further Reflection on Program Delivery and Contractual Requirements

Coordinators/Managers raised practical considerations around matters including: a) access to suitable, affordable venues; b) striking balance between the relatively low demand and high resource requirement of online delivery; and c) their (previously uncharted, but positive) experiences of establishing school holiday/weekend playgroups (vs. more familiar weekly term-based program). Challenges inherent to regional/remote delivery were highlighted across jurisdictions. When asked to reflect on a formal PlayConnect+ Linker role (tried in one State for 12 months), some staff endorsed this as a strong value-add, while others saw potential but felt finite resources could be better spent building capacity among staff in existing roles. Certainly, building staff capacity and securing their retention with PlayConnect+ were advocated as critical to program success, and worthy of close ongoing attention.

News of the 2-year NECP funding extension was welcome. Yet, the Coordinators/Managers we spoke to anticipated non-trivial implementation challenges given the increased costs of program delivery but non-indexed funding on offer. Coordinators/Managers valued the decision-making power they felt they retained locally—that their teams were empowered to identify local needs and solutions—as well as the regular national Community of Practice meetings that offered the opportunity for cross-site discussion and collaborative problem-solving. These senior staff also shared their views more broadly on matters related to policy (e.g., perceived potential alignment of PlayConnect+ within anticipated forthcoming 'Foundational Supports' funding, also recently announced by the Commonwealth Government [in outline only; with details still to follow]). Relatedly—and in the context of societal shifts toward the mainstream inclusion of people with disability/neurodivergence—Coordinators/managers expressed the ongoing need for some specialist/segregated programs like PlayConnect+, alongside other mainstream inclusive services and settings. This point was echoed by many families we spoke to, who shared the importance they placed in PlayConnect+ as a 'safe' and 'non-judgemental' place (compared to their experiences elsewhere). Likewise, group Facilitators/Assistants had also described the critical need for PlayConnect+ as a safe, soft-entry point to playgroups and community connection, from which children and families might be supported to gain skills and confidence they could then take with them, transitioning into successful later experiences within mainstream settings.

Further Reflection on Evaluation Activities

When asked to share any relevant feedback on data collection and reporting—including to meet contractual requirements and to support aligned independent evaluation efforts (including, but not limited to, our work reported here)—Coordinators/Managers acknowledged the challenge this presented to staff and families. However, they also emphasised valuing evaluation; their own motivated participation, and encouraging their staff and families to do so.

In preparing this report, we reviewed the published research on supported playgroups, finding a growing body of investigation over the past decade. As we heard from PlayConnect+ staff directly, supported playgroups have been described in the research literature as offering a ‘soft entry’ point for vulnerable children and families to engage with community services (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2020; Jackson, 2013), and as an economically viable early support option, including in context of group-based delivery format (Houtrow et al., 2014).

A body of primary research has sought to understand the benefits of supported playgroup participation for children and families, and a number of synthesis reports have collated and critiqued this primary work. One such systematic review by Lakhani and Macfarlane (2015), for example, synthesised findings across a small number of quantitative and larger number of qualitative studies (all completed over a decade ago). They concluded that supported playgroups confer broad benefits for children (i.e., social development, transition to school, and overall health) and social and health support for parents/carers (e.g., through knowledge sharing and collaborative learning). Likewise, a more recent review by Williams et al. (2018) reported that parents/carers and other stakeholders saw wide-ranging benefits from supported playgroup participation; including facilitation of child learning, increased quality of parent-child interaction- and home learning environments, and improved parent/carer mental health and self-efficacy.

Many primary studies on the topic of supported playgroups have focused on marginalised families, including immigrants/refugees or families from otherwise socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. While these are consistent with focus elements of NECP *Support for Children* funding, we note relatively little consideration of playgroup-based efforts to support children with disabilities/developmental concerns as the key NECP and PlayConnect+ focus. Two exceptions include a cross-sectional survey study of ~250 families of autistic children by Playgroup Australia (2010) and a specific music therapy group evaluation by Williams et al. (2012). In the former study, around 25% of families had experienced PlayConnect—precursor to the current PlayConnect+ program—and these parents/carers were found to have benefitted from connection with others with similar lived experience, feeling more confident as caregivers, and better informed on autism-specific services (Playgroup Australia, 2010). In Williams et al.’s (2012) study, with a sample of >200 children with disabilities and parent/carer self-report- and clinician observation measures, child communication and social skills, parent-child responsive interaction, parent mental health, and family social connections were all reportedly improved via a 10-week music therapy playgroup.

Our current evaluation approach included 1) in-depth qualitative interviews with a large sample of PlayConnect+ staff working in various roles, and 2) a mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) study with 21 parents/carers (from 20 families, with children aged <2-8 years with a range of support needs) engaged with PlayConnect+ for various periods of time and across all Australian States/Territories. We took an inductive (i.e., bottom-up) approach to qualitative analysis to our interviews, synthesising individual participant insights and experiences into abstracted themes, reflecting the various experiences shared and any points of difference, within and across for staff and family groups. We saw convergence across many elements across staff- and family experience, and our findings reinforce accounts of many of the benefits supported playgroups have been claimed to confer, in past research. For instance, the parents/carers we spoke to clearly valued their PlayConnect+ playgroups, feeling they gained from the opportunity to learn from one another and from program staff, and seeing value in their children’s enhanced learning and socialisation skills, including growing relationships with peers (with some contrast to experiences elsewhere).

The quantitative data we have collected offers some contextualisation of the families we heard from and, with additional time and resource, may offer further insights than those reported here (e.g., by coding parent-child interaction footage, and additional analysis of Five Minute Speech Sample and Satisfaction ratings, socio-demographic data, etc.), including if the dataset can be expanded with additional families interviewed and/or by current participant follow-up in the year/s after initial interview (similar to our follow-up phase of interviews with staff, which yielded new insights beyond those achieved at initial interview). We outline some options for ongoing evaluation below, including for:

- a) The logical, direct extension of our current work (i.e., feasible alongside the 2-year NECP funding extension);
- b) Broader activities beyond straightforward extension of current work (i.e., likely requiring additional approvals);
- c) A more involved program of work to establish generalisable evidence (i.e., requiring dedicated research funding, beyond the scope of an evaluation service agreement as subcontract to primary program delivery agreement/s).

Recommendations for Future Delivery, Resourcing, and Evaluation

Recommendations for PlayConnect+ Program Delivery

PlayConnect+ appears to be meeting the NECP *Support for Children* objectives of offering safe, inclusive and tailored support for children with disabilities/developmental concerns (and their parents/carers)—including for autism but also a range of other child conditions and family circumstances. PlayConnect+ has grown across the 2023-2025 NECP funding period, successfully attracting and engaging families, and with recent growing demand and diversity reported by staff. To the extent possible with finite resources and growing operating costs, PlayConnect+ staff strive to offer universal access to playgroups, wherein supports are then tailored to the identified needs of attending children and families (presenting a range of often complex support needs, including among parents/carers). Staff accounts suggest PlayConnect+ is largely achieving its ambition of 'no wrong door'. Yet resource constraints (e.g., for sustaining groups within regions, and for appropriate venues, specific equipment, or personnel requirements, etc.) may mean some motivated and in-principle eligible families are lost to sustained participation. Within and around sessions, PlayConnect+ staff conduct themselves in ways that authentically support inclusion. Nevertheless, they (and families alike) still see clear need and value for *specialised/segregated* settings like PlayConnect+, where children and adults with disability/neurodivergence can be themselves, and feel safe and accepted, and thereby turn up and play together and, in so doing, build trust, connection, and confidence. With play as the starting point, and non-judgement among several core values at the heart of PlayConnect+, participants experience, benefit from, and provide for others much needed peer-to-peer support; adults supporting one another through shared lived-experience and acceptance, practical advice and information, and children forming friendships and learning together.

From insights gleaned through our participation in meetings across the NECP 2023-2025 funding period, and our in-depth interviews with staff and families, we offer the following suggestions for ongoing PlayConnect+ delivery:

- **To continue as usual the core business of PlayConnect+ delivery**, trusting in group Facilitators/Assistants and program Coordinators/Managers staff who bring rich knowledge of their families and communities, and show strong commitment to making a genuine difference locally, and through national collaboration; including:
 - Continuing efforts to reach and maximise participation from families in known under-represented groups, including via meaningful engagement with community elders/leaders, and growing PlayConnect+ staff capacity within such groups (i.e., leveraging intersectional lived-experience toward family engagement, just as we have heard how staff lived experience of disability/neurodivergence seems to foster family trust); and
 - Continuing local partnership development efforts to foster community connection as new families are identified and join PlayConnect+, and as communities, local services and national initiatives grow and evolve.
- **To consider the professional development and ongoing support needs of PlayConnect+ staff**, how requisite skills and confidence might be built, and how to adequately resource this work; including:
 - Supporting Facilitator/Assistant confidence and capacity through collaborative connection opportunities for staff at this level (similar to the Community of Practice for which Coordinators/Managers expressed value);
 - Specifically, developing Facilitator/Assistants skills and confidence to support parent/carer needs, which they have found surprisingly complex (noting parent/carer wellbeing is foundational for child wellbeing, and seeking support for children is often the 'in' to parents/carers seeking support for themselves; so investing in equipping PlayConnect+ staff to better support parents/carers, for child and family benefit, seems well justified);
 - Consider whether/how having some staff in more costly/qualified roles (e.g., allied health/social work) could benefit families, such as by building capacity among the Facilitators/Assistants for direct work with families.
- **To maintain effective PlayConnect+ delivery formats, and consider a limited, diversified range of other options:**
 - Continue the standard face-to-face playgroup offering which is highly valued by families, and where staff note growing demand and diversification of engaged families (if still barely 'scratching the surface');
 - Consider the rationale of weekly school term-based sessions separate from school holiday playgroups (i.e., perhaps able to be combined, for greater continuity for younger- and holiday-time attendance for older children);
 - Continue a small-scale, coordinated online delivery (i.e., balancing relatively limited demand and high cost);
 - Explore other outreach and 'soft' engagement options (e.g., mobile PlayConnect+; community/library pop-ups);
 - Reflect further on the role of music therapy within PlayConnect+ (noting we heard little specifically about these groups; but consider that *Music*—like *Play*—may be an effective *Starting Point*); including whether this may be a beneficial broad outreach/soft engagement option, whether music therapists staff could upskill other staff, etc.

Recommendations for Funding and Policy

By virtue of its low intensity, group format, PlayConnect+ is a relatively inexpensive yet highly specialised support, offering broad-reaching soft-entry to other community supports for children and families with potentially complex intersecting needs. We heard how PlayConnect+ staff—at all levels—are highly skilled and motivated, and how parents/carers experience PlayConnect+ as a ‘tight-knit community’. Yet staff also advocate PlayConnect+ is barely ‘scratching the surface’ of community need, eager to scale up to engage and support more families at more locations.

We highlight the following key resourcing needs for this foundational community support program:

- **To secure long-term funding that appropriately resources program delivery** (i.e., indexed to contemporary costs) and considers the full range of service needs for particular subsections of society (e.g., to buy or loan particular equipment or personnel to enable engagement of families in priority target groups), and can attract, retain and further upskill staff, who bring the requisite skills and lived experiences to their role to effectively support families (including working at regional/remote sites; seeking to engage First Nations and CALD families, etc);
- **To improve cross-system alignment** toward effective local partnerships and national operational and strategic work, including recognising the intrinsic link between any successful efforts to directly support children and to support families (i.e., that parent/carer wellbeing is critical for child wellbeing, and that children are the ‘in’ for parents/carers to seek and receive supports for themselves, as individuals and as parents/carers); and
- Relatedly, **to consider a place for PlayConnect+ within future mechanisms to resource foundational supports** in mainstream community settings/services for children who present a range of disabilities/developmental concerns—whether transient/developmental or lifelong/disabling—and have the greatest chance of thriving when their families are connected to community, and their parents/carers feel confident and supported.

We present options for logical next-step, and next-phase extensions of the current evaluation below, but advocate that another key resourcing need is **to fund a substantial program of research to rigorously appraise the benefits of supported playgroup participation** for children, families, and society. The quality of much playgroup research has been critiqued as ‘low’ (e.g., Lakhani & Macfarlane, 2015; Williams et al., 2018), which does not indicate the work has been done poorly but, rather, that research at scale which includes a) element/s of comparison or control (across participants, groups, or timepoints), b) objective, quantitative measurement, and c) other careful consideration of potential sources of bias affecting interpretation is needed before confident, generalisable conclusions about effectiveness can be drawn. Research to truly understand to what extent and how supported playgroups benefit individuals, and any conditions that might amplify or minimise benefits—the ‘What works for Whom? How? And Why?’—is time- and resource intensive, achievable only with 1) dedicated funding for both service provision- and evaluation components, and 2) strong community-research partnership to ensure effective coordinated activities.

We offer **two illustrative examples**—one past and another in its establishment phase—**of how such a program of work could be founded** to rigorously evaluate the benefits of playgroup participation for children and families:

1. Across 2010-2020, the Commonwealth Department of Social Services (DSS) funded the national Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres (ASELCCs), including Research staff and activities. One centre, the Victorian ASELCC, housed on La Trobe University (LTU) Bundoora campus, afforded sustained community-academic partnership, delivering innovative practice, growing community capacity, and new understanding of childhood autism (Bent et al., 2018, 2022; Green et al., 2021; Hudry et al., 2018, 2020; Smith et al., 2022; Vivanti et al. 2014). Following such a model, one or more PlayConnect+ playgroups could be embedded within a community-academic partnership setting, enabling focused co-produced evaluation—that is, research activities feasibly integrated within the supported playgroup delivery, whilst ensuring Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) approvals and related oversight are in place to safeguard staff and family experiences *and* scientific rigour alike.
2. The Commonwealth Government has recently funded Early Supports ‘pilots’ in South Australia and Victoria (DSS) and Western Australia (WA; NDIA). Each includes investment in evaluation work (alongside community service delivery) to address the potential benefits and implications of offering focused early supports for families with infants showing early developmental difference/concern; again, recognising the value of community-academic partnership at scale for rigorous investigation of service needs. The NDIA-funded WA ‘pilot’ with *Inklings* service model builds on clinical evidence from the Australian Infant Communication and Engagement Trial (AICES; Segal et al. 2023; Whitehouse et al., 2019, 2021) and includes a parallel LTU-led evaluation (2025+). The DSS-funded Victorian Early Supports ‘pilot’—with development, training and evaluation work also LTU-led—will bring the US-developed *Parents and Infants Engaged* (PIE; Baranek et al. website) program to Australia for implementation and evaluation. Similarly, aligning PlayConnect+ with evaluation at scale could enable wider, more representative sampling, multi-timepoint assessment, and HREC oversight of participant experiences *and* scientific standards.

Recommendations for Next Stage and Future Evaluation

Strengths of the current evaluation include strong representation from staff (including geographic reach and diversity), and the use of semi-structured interviews with inductive coding and initial theme generation combined with opportunity for additional reflection and feedback at follow-up interviews. Similarly, we had balanced representation of families across PlayConnect+ sites and delivery formats (and with some representation of other diversity factors), here with mixed-methods approach leveraging standardised quantitative (i.e., life satisfaction and parent-child relationship) and inductive qualitative (i.e., interview) elements.

Limitations of our evaluation—including as a function of time and resource constraints—include relatively small sample size of family participants (for quantitative components), underrepresentation of some priority target subgroups and regions (e.g., First Nations families on country; CALD families with recent migrant/refugee status and limited English-language capacity; families in remote and very remote areas), single time-point data collection (i.e., no control group, though we did see variation in the time families' had been with PlayConnect+), and likely selection bias (i.e., families plausibly choosing to speak to us having had a good PlayConnect+ experience and valuing its continuity). We have collected additional data (e.g., parent-child interaction footage) which will require additional time to process, and benefit from further recruitment (i.e., larger sample, follow-up contact, etc.) for confident interpretation.

Possible direct extension of our current work (i.e., within 2025-2027 extension) could include:

- Growing our sample of families, including seeking to fill current representation gaps (i.e., selected groups or contexts, such as families in certain regions or representing particular socio-demographic backgrounds, children with identified developmental conditions/needs, families accessing particular PlayConnect+ formats, etc.);
- Follow-up with our current sample and any new recruited families (similar to our follow-up of staff) to:
 - Share our initial findings from first-round Staff- and Family Experience interviews and hear any feedback;
 - Hear any updates on family circumstances and experiences (i.e., of ongoing engagement with PlayConnect+ and/or transition to other services) after a 12- to 24-month period since first meeting them; and
 - Reconnect with the children we met to see their skill development and any new challenges arising;
- Continuing to process our already-collected quantitative data—including socio-demographic-, family relationship- and parent-child interaction elements—that could afford new insights into links between experiences of PlayConnect+, and personal/family features measured via standardised, objective measurement; and
- Continue our protocol of interviewing staff who have shown themselves to be insightful and trustworthy representatives of family experiences by proxy (and recognising time and resources will constrain the number of families we can interview directly, and also that those families in greatest need will likely also be those who are most difficult to engage in research participation to share their experience with us directly).

Options beyond direct extension of current work (likely feasible in 2025-2027) could include:

- Hearing experiences of PlayConnect+ directly from children; whether through:
 - Direct questions and/or child-carer activity completed at Family Experience follow-up;
 - Child group activity completed at PlayConnect+ shared for our analysis and interpretation;
 - Seeking Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) for us to attend and observe some PlayConnect+ sessions, for insights on how children participate and interact together and with parents/carers and staff (i.e., 5th option within our initial Evaluation Plan here);
- Systematically collecting and synthesising collective insights on PlayConnect+ operations from the program leadership group (e.g., Steering Committee, Community of Practice, etc) and on benefits of supported playgroup participation from the scientific- and grey literature;
- Resuming our proposal to access and conduct additional analysis of program/SCORE data.

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