

# Little Things

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# Making the move to school easier

## **Connie Clarke looks at the benefits of co-locating playgroups and schools for families and communities**

Parents are our children's first teachers, but it also takes a village to raise them – and support them.

That's the philosophy behind an exciting new partnership between Playgroup WA and schools, designed to smooth the path for children through their early childhood and into the all-important primary school years.

As one of the biggest initiatives Playgroup WA has embarked on in its 41 years, the Enhanced Transition to Schools program will foster better relationships between families and their local schools in the public, independent and Catholic schools systems

Playgroup WA Chief Executive Officer David Zarb said family involvement in the early years of learning was a crucial part of predicting success for children in later years, and the program, officially launched last November by the Minister for Education, Peter Collier, had the potential to change the face of the early education landscape in WA.

"Research has shown that the early years from pre-birth to three years is an especially critical time

in young children's growth and development, and that family engagement in their child's education and more broadly with the school, is a major factor in predicting successful outcomes for children," David said.

"Increasing the number of schools that host parent-led community playgroups is a focus of this project. Playgroup venues are increasingly difficult to find, particularly in areas of high population growth where many people are new to the area with limited support from family and friends. With schools hosting playgroups, families will be provided with opportunities to familiarise themselves with their local school as well as the school community and environment."

Project manager Dianne Mazzucato agrees the program has a raft of benefits, ranging from providing social and learning opportunities for children, to giving new parents a chance to build support networks in their local area.

She said family relationships with schools strongly influenced children, and the project aimed

to help children and families be ready to attend and thrive at school, and for schools to be ready for those children and families to transition positively to school.

"We know that improving relationships improves outcomes and this provides a win-win scenario for both families and schools," Dianne said. "The schools get to know the families, and the families get to know each other. Parents who are involved in the children's learning early tend to become active school citizens later, so the school benefits from that capacity building too."

While there are 47 schools state-wide that already host playgroups, the Enhanced Transition initiative aims to ultimately bring hundreds more onboard – with the end game being playgroups in schools becoming the norm.

Glenn Rondoni, Principal at White Gum Valley Primary School, has found having a playgroup on the premises a great plus, providing an important and welcome link for new parents.

"There have been a lot of young families brought together in a









suburb where there aren't a lot of places for them to meet," Glenn said. "It's providing a lovely link for the school because the mothers who have children moving into formal schooling continue to offer advice and support for younger mums.

"It's a good introduction back into a school environment for parents who have not experienced the school system for well over a decade. It allows them and their children to make new connections and friendships that continue through the years. They become friends for life in some cases, moving through school, sporting clubs, high school and beyond together."

The project is federally funded until 2016 through an agreement between the Department of Local Government and Communities and the Department of Education as part of the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early

Childhood Education.

It will involve valuable input from the Catholic Education Office, the WA Association of Independent Schools and the Education Department.

Already underway is the inaugural state-wide mapping of playgroups that are linked in some way to a school. Mapping across public and non-government school sectors will provide a more complete picture for the first time.

"It's a universal strategy, but there will be some targeting of vulnerable parts of the community," Dianne said.

"The program will be based on everything we know from the research – which shows that positive transitions and supported relationships lead to good community outcomes.

"We want to help give parents confidence in their role as first teachers because those everyday experiences and relationships

in the early years provide the foundation for everything that comes after."

The mapping is also likely to prompt schools to consider offering their site for a community-based playgroup where families can meet.

"Playgroup WA will also be able to match interested schools with the thousands of families that contact us each year looking for a local playgroup," David said. "This information will also allow us to develop strategies to support schools that have existing playgroups with a particular emphasis on meeting the needs of disadvantaged children and families.

"For Playgroup WA this is a homecoming of sorts with the Department of Education being the first agency back in the 1970s to recognise the value of playgroups. Stay tuned – there are exciting times ahead."

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# Learning through play

As an early childhood teacher, Suzann Schomburg understands the importance of children learning through play, and it's the reason she joined the White Gum Valley playgroup last year, based at the local primary school, with her two daughters Lola, 3, and Poppy, 1. Suzann (pictured above with her daughters) welcomes the move to bring more playgroups into school environments because it allows parents access to purpose-built sites and encourages them to join a playgroup that is easy to find. "Many of the playgroups are held in community halls and other buildings, and it takes more effort to find them, but when the local school has a playgroup on site, parents are already aware of the schools in their area, so they are more likely to join," Suzann said.

"It's a nice way for people to get in touch with other parents in the area and build friendships.

"For their children, it would definitely help with the transition. It allows them to make friends early and feel comfortable and confident when they move into the school years."

Although Suzann will enroll her girls in the Catholic school system when their formal schooling starts, she believes playgroups on schools sites will bring social cohesion and learning benefits to families that can then be

transferred into any school system.

Principal Glenn Rondoni said, if nothing else, playgroups on school sites allowed parents to have children of different ages at the same location, giving them peace of mind, easy access to new relationships and sound advice from other local parents.

"Parents can drop off their older child or children at school and then enjoy a cup of tea with other parents, while their youngsters play and interact. It's a fantastic service, and a valuable one."

## ***Little Things you can do...***

The Enhanced Transition to School Project is an exciting new program for Playgroup WA. If you want to know more about the project or to talk about starting a playgroup in a school near you, please call our Hotline on 1800 171 882.