

Raising Rights from the Start

Submission to the NSW Law Reform Commission Review of
the Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 (NSW)

July 2025



Playgroup NSW is a not-for-profit organisation that connects children and families to people and services in the community that positively impact their quality of life.

Our impact at a glance:

- 550 playgroups a week
- 26,000 playgroups a year
- 65,000 members across 99% of postcodes
- 650 volunteers, 75 staff

For over 50 years, Playgroup NSW has delivered and linked families to vital services such as parent support groups and playgroups for those experiencing vulnerability and diversity, and those who value community connections. We also support families to navigate the broader community and tertiary support systems, with playgroups an effective, local, place-based soft entry point underpinned by an early intervention and prevention approach.

We are proud to offer valuable volunteer opportunities and experiences through our community-led programs, and we support our volunteers to create connections through play within their communities.

All Playgroup NSW programs delivered across NSW and ACT are designed to help families navigate the joys and challenges of parenting and build strong, resilient communities.

Thousands of families connect via Playgroup sessions affiliated with or delivered by Playgroup NSW every week, building their parental capacity, building their village, and helping their children learn.

Playgroup NSW is the leading peak body for playgroups in NSW, committed to inclusivity and community, and at the heart of our playgroups lies the essence of connection. Since 1972, we focus on giving children an equal opportunity in education, health, and wellbeing.

We play a key role in ensuring that the voices of children and families are heard on matters that affect them at both the state and federal level, as well as lead a range of national consortia research projects, including building evidence based best practices, inclusive enablers and impact measurement frameworks.

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Introduction

Playgroup NSW welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important review of the Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 (NSW). As the peak body for playgroups in NSW we support more than 75,000 children and families through over 600 community-led playgroups across the state and over 50 peer support groups alongside parent capacity building and sector development.

Our vision is to ensure that all families — regardless of background, identity or circumstance — feel welcome, valued, and connected in the vital early years of parenting.

We work with families from a wide range of backgrounds, with a strong focus on those most likely to experience disadvantage or exclusion. This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, people with disability, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, LGBTQIA+ parents, young and sole parents, carers, families impacted by domestic violence, and those living in poverty or regional and remote areas.

Playgroups are often the first point of contact between families and the broader service system — making us uniquely placed to witness both the impacts of discrimination and the importance of inclusive, community-led responses.

Our submission draws on this lived experience, as well as the voices of our staff, volunteers, and families.

Our Participation in the Consultation Process

Playgroup NSW was honoured to take part in the NSW Law Reform Commission's consultation focus group, alongside the NSW Department of Communities and Justice. Our CEO, Emily Caska, and Administration Assistant and Lived Experience Spokesperson, Ellen Hester, represented our organisation.

Ellen shared her personal experiences as a woman with Down syndrome of discrimination and harassment, particularly in education, employment, and community settings. Her courage and insight highlighted the urgent need for legislative reform that reflects lived experience, prevents harm, and provides meaningful accountability.

Our Key Recommendations

1. Recognise and Protect Against Intersectional Discrimination

Many of the families we work with live at the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination — for example, a young Aboriginal mother with a disability, or a father from a refugee background raising children as a sole parent. Current laws do not adequately address how these forms of discrimination overlap and compound.

We support the inclusion of explicit protections against intersectional discrimination and recommend the Act be restructured to allow for the recognition of complex, interrelated experiences of harm.

2. Shift to a Positive Duty to Prevent Discrimination

We echo the consultation paper's proposal to move beyond reactive legal processes and introduce a positive duty on all public-facing entities to proactively eliminate discrimination and foster inclusion.

This approach mirrors our own model: playgroups are preventative, strengths-based environments. We help families build confidence, connection, and capacity before challenges escalate. Embedding a similar duty into the Act would shift the burden away from those experiencing harm and place it on those with the power to prevent it.

3. Include Children's Rights and Protections

As an organisation working directly with children, we believe the Act must explicitly include protections for children and acknowledge their right to equal participation in public life. Discrimination in early childhood — whether through inaccessibility, exclusion, or the marginalisation of caregivers — has lasting impacts.

Playgroup NSW strongly supports a child rights-based lens in the new legislation, aligned with the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the principles of the first 2,000 days of life.

4. Tackle Systemic Discrimination, Not Just Individual Harm

Many families we support face barriers that are systemic in nature — in health care, housing, early childhood education, and employment. These are not isolated incidents, but patterned inequalities built into systems and structures.

We recommend the Act recognise and define systemic discrimination, and provide mechanisms for collective complaints, investigations, and enforcement. Like our playgroup model, which engages at the community level to address root causes of exclusion, this approach would allow the Act to be more transformative and preventative

5. Expand Protected Attributes – Including Socio-Economic Status

We strongly support the addition of socio-economic status as a protected attribute. Many families at playgroup are living below the poverty line, on Centrelink benefits, or managing housing and food insecurity. Discrimination based on appearance, address, income source, or social position — though pervasive — is not currently addressed by law. Recognising socio-economic status would reflect the real-world experiences of families and help address structural disadvantage across generations.

6. Embed the Social Model of Disability

Playgroup NSW works closely with children and caregivers with disability. We see how inaccessible environments, rigid systems, and social attitudes — rather than impairments themselves — create exclusion.

We recommend the Act adopt the social model of disability, moving away from deficit-based language and toward a framework that requires inclusive design, universal access, and reasonable adjustments as the norm.

7. Simplify, Modernise, and Make the Law Accessible

For the families we support — and the community sector staff who advocate for them — the current Act is overly legalistic and difficult to navigate. Many people do not understand their rights or how to act on them.

We recommend simplifying the structure and language of the Act, including:

- A clear objectives clause and principles-based framing
- Plain English wording
- Stronger public education and engagement
- Accessible complaint pathways

As a trusted soft entry point, playgroups could be part of a wider education effort to promote awareness of the reformed Act.

8. Leverage Playgroups for Anti-Discrimination Education and Capacity-Building

Playgroup NSW provides a powerful platform to embed anti-discrimination and human rights education at the community level. Our groups across 99% of NSW postcodes reach families in the critical early years of parenting and serve as trusted, culturally safe spaces for reflection, learning and connection.

We recommend the Act be supported by:

- Investment in playgroups as delivery sites for public education on human rights and anti-discrimination principles
- Dedicated funding to build the capability of our workforce and volunteers to support families experiencing discrimination and uphold inclusive practices
- Co-designed, community-informed resources and training that reflect the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, CALD communities, LGBTQIA+ parents, people with disability, and others disproportionately affected by discrimination

With the right investment, playgroups can become local hubs of inclusion — preventing discrimination before it begins, modelling inclusive values, and empowering families to understand and advocate for their rights.

9. Address Online Discrimination and Vilification

Many parents — particularly women, young people, LGBTQIA+ and culturally diverse families — experience harassment and exclusion online, in parenting forums, social media groups, or when sharing their experiences publicly.

We support expanding the definition of vilification and discrimination to cover the online environment, with appropriate protections, accountability mechanisms, and education.

10. Establish a Dedicated Anti-Discrimination Commissioner or Ombudsman

We support the establishment of a dedicated, independent body to:

- Monitor systemic issues across all portfolios
- Promote compliance and best practice
- Engage in public education
- Assist with accessible complaints and resolution
- Share open data
- Lead cultural change

A proactive Commissioner could partner with early years providers and community organisations like ours to foster inclusion from the ground up.

Conclusion

At Playgroup NSW, we believe a child's and family's identity — their culture, gender, ability, economic status, or family structure — should never be a barrier to belonging.

This review is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape anti-discrimination law in NSW so it reflects who we are now and who we want to become. We urge the NSW Law Reform Commission to be bold in vision, inclusive in scope, and preventative in approach.

We thank the Commission for its leadership and the opportunity to contribute.

Our Impact: Playgroup NSW

ABOUT PLAYGROUP NSW

IMPACT AT A GLANCE

- 550 playgroups a week
- 26,000 playgroups a year
- 63,868 members
- 546 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in culturally appropriate Playgroups
- 5235 parents attending peer to peer support sessions
- Members in 99% of NSW postcodes, reflecting the incredible reach and diversity of our community
- \$7.2 million annual funding, 30% growth in income over the past year, enhancing our impact
- 50+ years proudly in operation as the peak body with state and national footprint in services and advocacy

OUR STRATEGIC PLAN

OUR LEADERSHIP TEAM

Kellie Murray, Chief First Nations Officer
 Steve Moore, Chief Operating Officer
 Emily Caska, Chief Executive Officer
 Jennifer Kemp, Chief Social Impact Officer



OUR GROWING IMPACT



"My Playgroup experience has been overwhelmingly positive. The environment is nurturing and inclusive, fostering a sense of community among the children and parents. The activities are well-organised and engaging, promoting both fun and learning. Overall, it's been a wonderful opportunity for my child to acquire and develop new skills in a safe and friendly setting."

"Playgroup has made me a better parent."

"I experienced the Playgroups as very healthy for me. In enjoying every minute of playing with my daughter that's also been one of my depression. Also it's very healthy for her to discover these places new friends and new things."

"I am honestly so grateful for Playgroup as it has supported my daughter's social development, encouraged her to build and nurture new friendships, given me so many new skills for playing as well as the opportunity for relationships with other parents, and it is an experience my daughter absolutely loves. I absolutely love watching her happy, smile, have so much energy out of the gate, outgoing and forward with her new friends. It's the highlight of my day."



"Playgroup has only just started back up locally after 2 years, and it's been a great experience. My daughter really enjoys going, and hoping to be able to take both my girls regularly."

"Getting a reason to leave the house rather than being stuck indoors with no social interaction has helped my mental health and my children love somewhere new to play and socialise."



"Playgroup is a great place for adults and children to come together socially to learn and have fun. I have made friends with other parents and my son has friends he will have for school and beyond."

"Having to a strict routine with the mother's group being out together with specific needs and being seen more relaxed and only have to bring the one bag a week to get rid of the house and get on the go. The other day a child and I laugh with the girls in town about all my friends at this one which seem to like or share thoughts of experiences without judgement and my family always find all activities being together when at the park or cafe so it really makes it fun and of going to town."

"Playgroup has been an excellent experience for myself and my child, connecting with other local families is a definite part of our week!"

"Playgroups have helped me to not feel isolated, it has allowed me to celebrate my daughter with her development and made me feel supported by the community when shared the difficulties of parenting. It has stimulated my daughter with activities I would not have thought of, it also gives her the opportunity to socialise, share and see how other (parents) treat each other."

"Without the intervention of the family (friends of friends) and parent networks already in existence (new parents) and local services from the local (Council) Australia and Playgroup within the Playgroup, the entire life and parenting experience would be severely affected. It's not a very healthy relationship and with the knowledge and support gained through Playgroup, it's not to avoid the relationship and begin reconnecting."





OUR EVIDENCE BASED PROGRAMS

Playgroup NSW Supported Programs & Playgroups

Playgroup NSW has been supporting and connecting families for over five decades through a range of Playgroups and Parent and Carer Support Groups facilitated by either volunteers or trained employees.

COMMUNITY PLAYGROUPS

Seventeen non-Community Playgroups and cooperative ones (Playgroups affiliated with Playgroup NSW). These groups cater for various children and families, from babies to primary age and are run by local volunteers who best understand what their community requires from a Playgroup. There are also Community Playgroups that cater to a range of services looking for something specific, such as Baby Groups or language-specific groups.

ABORIGINAL SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS (SSPG)

SSPGs offer cultural and cultural play activities and experiences that enhance the strengths, interests and emerging skills of children aged 0-5 years. Our qualified early childhood educators provide a nurturing and stimulating environment that supports children's growth and learning during their early years through intentional teaching and relationship building and service adaptation to build confidence in speaking by 3 years and work with parents and caregivers that support their children's development and overall well-being.

COMMUNITY AND FAMILY SUPPORTS

Baby Playgroups cater to families with a child up to 12 months of age, offering babies a safe variety of early learning experiences and giving parents and carers a safe space to discuss ideas, challenges, and the joys and frustrations of parenting.

TIMELESS PLAY INTERGENERATIONAL PLAYGROUPS

Timeless Play Intergenerational Playgroups bring together three generations - seniors, children and their parents. Interacting with various adults is new experience to the Playgroup experience for children and can be incredibly enriching for those who don't have access to spending time with their own grandparents.

MYTIME

MyTime programs offer support groups for parents and carers of children with a disability, developmental delay or special medical condition. It provides peer-to-peer and online peer support for parents and carers, with a focus on the present and a view on how to proactively meet needs. The group offers to Parents an early start-up to get to work on a higher level of care than other children.

PLAYCONNECT +

PlayConnect+ Playgroups are for families of children with disability and/or developmental concerns from birth to 18 months of age. Children do not require a formal diagnosis or referral to attend. PlayConnect+ is a program for the whole family and supports all children and their families and is included in PlayConnect+.

PALS

Playgroup Peer Supported (PALS) Playgroups provide developmental opportunities and learning experiences for 0-5 years of age of all abilities. Activities are co-designed for families where children with a disability get exposure to developmental culture, arts, sporting or recreational activities. It's a great option for families with those to explore children's needs and enhance families' understanding of disability and inclusion within the community.

ABORIGINAL SUPPORTED

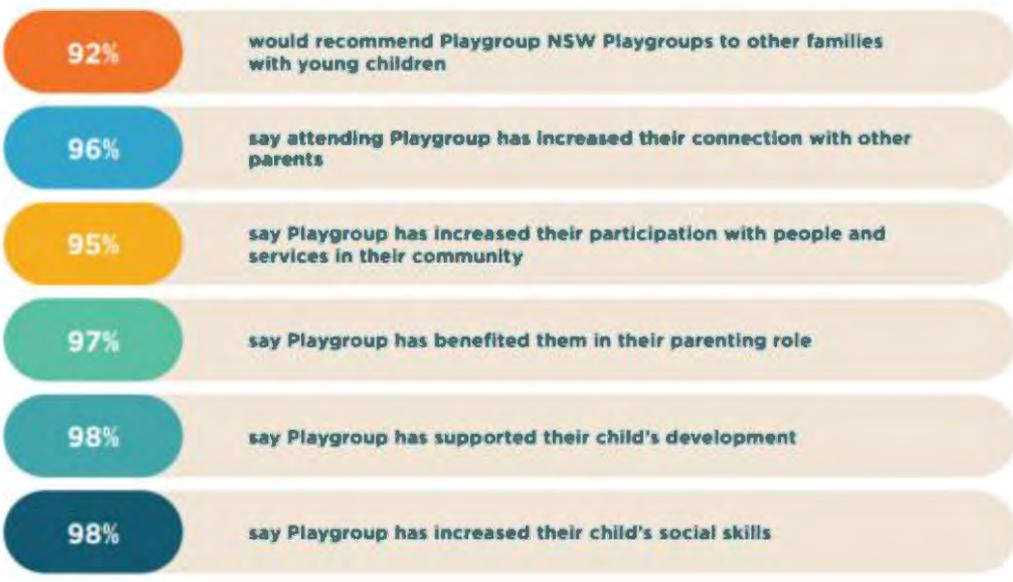
Aboriginal Supported Playgroups play an important role in connecting Aboriginal families to their culture while offering family and parental support. These Playgroups are an opportunity to connect with others in their community and offer learning opportunities for other services and resources, while acting as a stepping stone to early learning and enrolment. The program is delivered by dedicated Aboriginal educators who strive to engage the gap and increase quality in education, wellbeing and health outcomes for young Aboriginal children and their families.

LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC AND CULTURALLY DIVERSE GROUPS

Language-specific and Culturally Diverse (LSD) Playgroups cater for a long tradition of supporting culturally and linguistically diverse families and, in general, supports their communities by offering Playgroups, which cater to over 20 different languages and cultures in Playgroup across NSW.

PLAYTOGETHER

Play Together offers groups of families within Playgroups, where all members engage and benefit from a quality, quality developmental play to participate in community, reciprocal settings. This is achieved through training, workshops and activities to build the capacity of educators, service providers and industry events, as well as the provision of a range of resources to support the learning, development, family support and activities to build the confidence of families to participate and inclusion.





OUR KEY MESSAGES



Play is critical to the first 2000 days of a child's life

Playgroups are a unique soft entry point that are local, place based, early intervention and prevention model

Playgroups are unique - both children and parents benefit

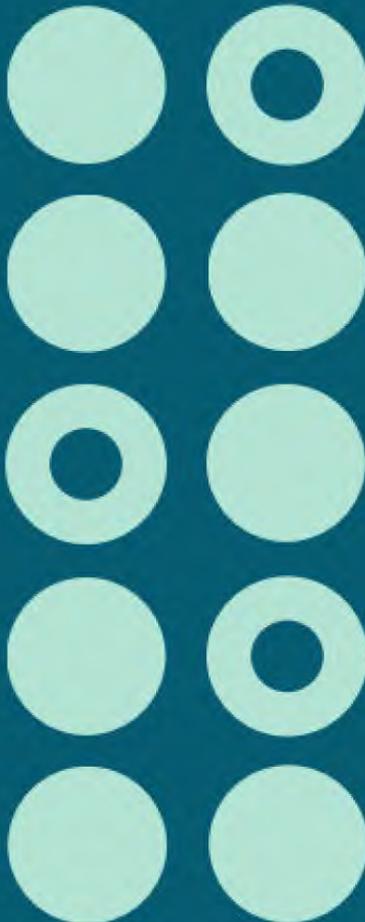
Playgroup NSW is leading the future of playgroups, innovative in our approaches across community and supported groups to reach dads, multicultural families, vulnerable cohorts, remote communities, Aboriginal families and children in non-traditional settings such as out of home care and adoptive families

Playgroups are a key foundational support, navigation, connector and referral point in the critical early years

Peer to peer support is a key component of playgroups in building capacity, nurturing connection and resilience



SEE WHAT ALL THE FUN IS ABOUT



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We work with passion and pride to ensure that every child and family has the very best start in life.

Working together across government, philanthropy, early childhood, health, community, research and corporate sectors enables us to grow our reach and impact to those who need it most across our community, disability, First Nations, multicultural and intergenerational offerings.

We are so much more than just playgroups - from play to peer support to community development, health, early intervention, prevention, evidence based research and evaluation, we are proud to firmly place children and families at the centre of all we do

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Emily Caska
CEO, Playgroup NSW



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Chief Executive Officer



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