

‘Exploring the role of playgroups in the age of polycrisis: future proofing everyday support systems’

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1st International Symposium “Infrastructures for Everyday Life, Social Well-being and New Metrics for Public Decision-Making”, University of Murcia 2026

Overview

- Introductions
- Definitions
- Playgroups
- Future proofing
- Next steps



Definitions

Playgroups – aka parent and baby, parent and toddler, parent and child groups, baby groups etc - refers to any groups which *provide activities for children and social interaction for adults and children.*

'Community wellbeing is the combination of social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political conditions identified by individuals and their communities as essential for them to flourish and fulfil their potential (Wiseman and Brasher 2008, 358).

Resilience: 'The ability of a nation, community, individual to harness resources and expertise to help themselves prepare for, respond to and recover from adversity and communal challenges' [Scottish Government].

A **polycrisis** is a situation in which multiple, distinct crises occur simultaneously and interact in ways that amplify each other, producing outcomes more severe than the sum of the individual crises.

Navigating the everyday during a polycrisis

Loneliness and isolation

have been proven to increase the likelihood of low mood and perinatal depression in new mothers (Taylor et al., 2021).

Perinatal mental health problems affect **1 in 5 women** throughout their pregnancy or up to a year post-partum (NHS Inform, 2022).

70% of women hide or **underplay the severity of their illness** (Knight, 2021).

Suicide is the **leading cause of direct maternal death** within a year of having a baby (Knight et al., 2023).

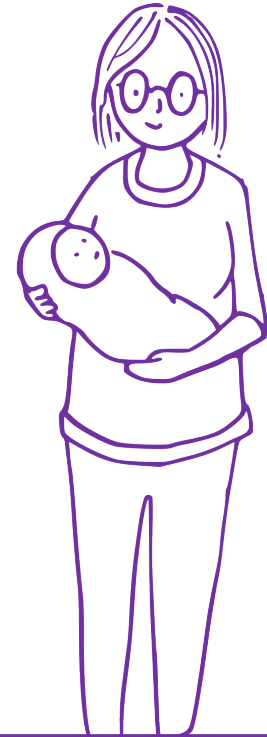
1 in 8 partners report mental health problems and describe a lack of support (Da Costa et al., 2018, Leiferman et al., 2021).

Maternal and paternal mental health problems can **impact negatively on child development** (Lowthian et al., 2023).

Increasing numbers of children are **not 'school ready'** when first attending school (Kindred, 2024).

First 1001 Days Movement has called the **5 year decline** in toddler development a 'ticking timebomb'.

There is **little policy focus for 0-2 years** outside of extending formal childcare provisions and those flagged as 'priority families'.



“So many people have bad birth stories, like why is it 50% of the population gives birth and we're having such a bad time doing it? How many births are happening every day? And there's so many people having bad births... I just don't think that's OK. I think it's like borderline epidemic bad.”

Playgroups

- In the UK since the 1960/70s
- Parent run, church/charity run, council run
- Can be 'stay and play' or follow more formal Early Years activities/syllabus
- Include subsidised, free or 'pay what you can' groups
- Research gap:
 - Most research focused in Australia, some in Europe – very little in UK
 - Most focus on child development and parent and child socialisation – particularly of families considered 'vulnerable'
 - Much focus on online parenting communities (ie Mumsnet)
 - Focus from education, health and early years
 - The unpaid/invisible role of women have been overlooked by social scientists

The Good Practice Guide for Parent and Toddler Groups (2014) describe them as *'offering vital friendship, making a valuable contribution to community life, and a life-saving avenue for families in crisis'*.

Methods and Projects

Pilot study

2022-23

- Participatory observation of 3 playgroups
- 7 interviews
- Comparative analysis
- Thematic analysis

BA / Leverhulme project

2023-2024

- 6 months of participatory observation 11 playgroups
- 27 interviews (organisers, members, non members)
- 2 deliberative expert discussion groups (experiential / professional)

Ongoing work

2024-present day

- 3 years evaluation of 'blended childcare in Govanhill (PI), focus groups, surveys, storytelling
- Scottish Government work: 'Whole Families Approach' and Communities of Practice project (co-I, facilitator)
- AcrossEU Seedfunding '*Family life at the margins: work/care organisation, wellbeing and resilience in remote rural communities in Switzerland, Finland and Scotland*' (Glasgow PI), spatial mapping and storytelling

Findings



CREATE A SENSE OF
BELONGING AND
WELLBEING



SOCIAL CAPITAL



COMMUNITY
VOLUNTARISM AND
RECIPROCITY



SKILLS AND
KNOWLEDGE
DEVELOPMENT



COMMUNITY
PARENTING



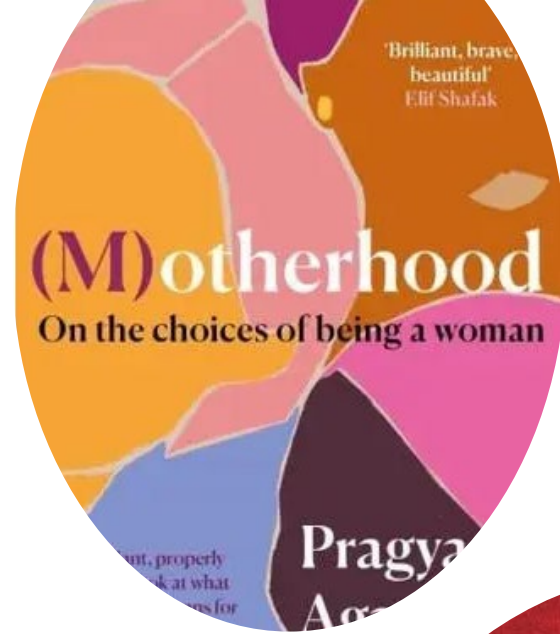
TRAUMA SUPPORT
AND A SAFE SPACE



CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Create a sense of belonging and identity

- Transition into parenthood: the 'matrescence'
- Share experiences, hear from others
- Meet people at the same stage in life
- Structure and routine
- Embed families into a 'community'



Annie's Story: Welcome to the Club

Parenting was
new and
overwhelming...



It can't
just be me!?

PLAY
GROUP
←



I came away with
more knowledge of
people's experiences.



For me, it was
like therapy.

I guess that's what people
mean when they say
'welcome to the club'.
I never really understood
what that meant, but I
guess there sort of is a
bit of a mum's club.



Creating long term connections and sense of community

Social capital and informal networks

“

You meet people, all different aspects of life, and they end up becoming friends for life, which is a beautiful community.

”



Bonding: Creates sense of belonging and roots new families in the community, weak and strong ties / ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ communities

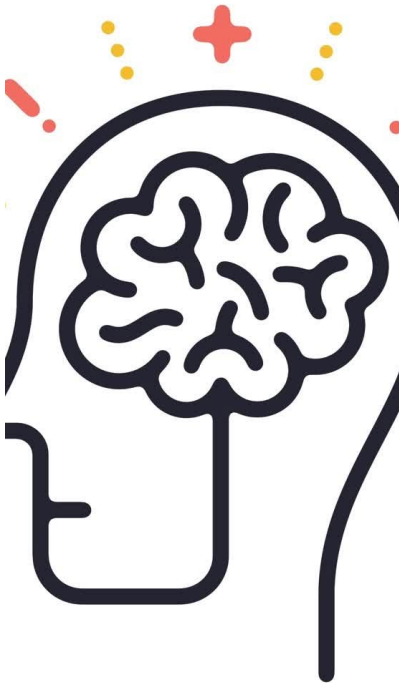


Bridging: between those that have children of similar ages facing similar challenges at similar stages of life between class, race, gender, age / generation



Linking: Networks, friends, connections with wider local area and groups, inc service providers, schools, community leaders, organisations, councils, political representatives

Skills and knowledge development



Deliberation: emphasises mutual understanding by hearing, discussing, comparing and reflecting on different approaches



Enlarged thinking: transcending “private subjective conditions” and taking into account the perspectives of others, helps members to form closer bonds and understand different ways of doing things



Public good: Develop deeper knowledge about the local area (place and space) and the needs of the community

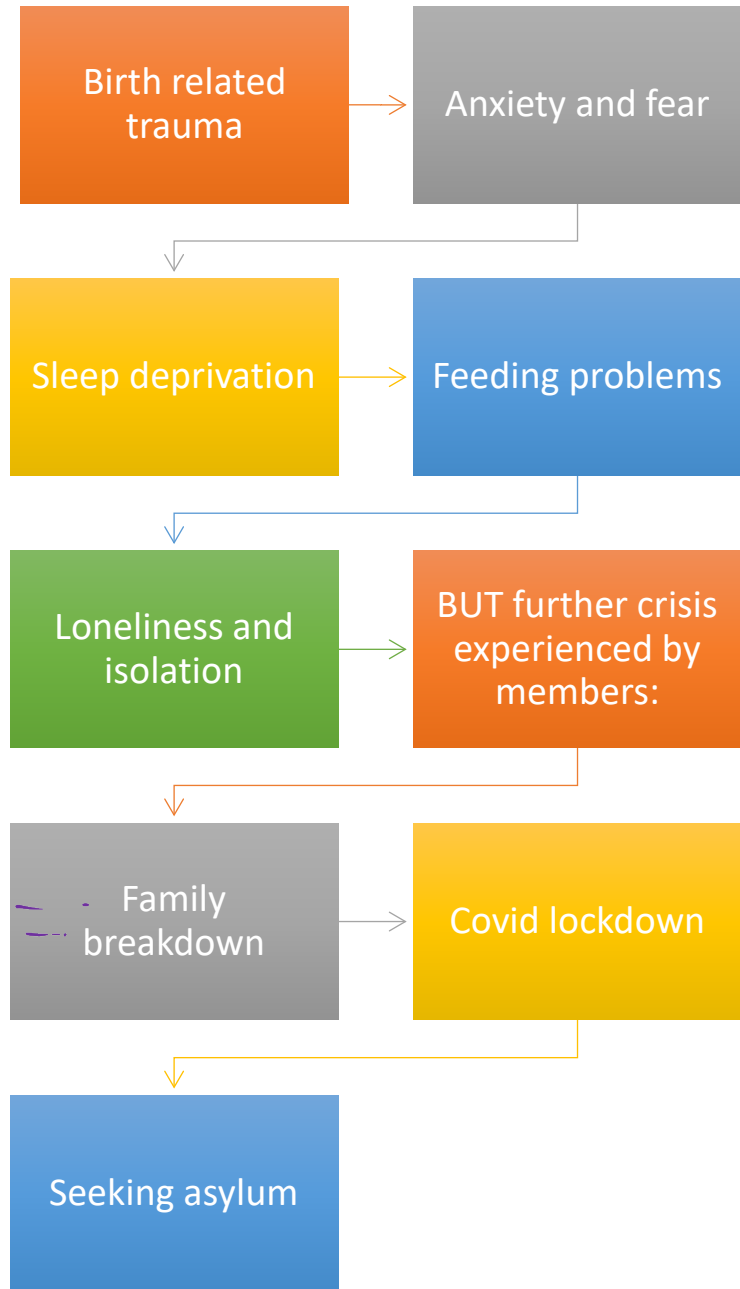


Community capacity and community leadership: Volunteers gain confidence in their skills (key for parents returning to work and future volunteering and community leadership)

Trauma and crisis support



I could see that actually what I was going through wasn't that normal, and for us, [that] made a big difference. Not that I was depressed but I was just so lacking in sleep it was utterly horrific.



Child development and parental learning



Spending time with parents
in learning environment

Increased confidence and
practice social and life skills

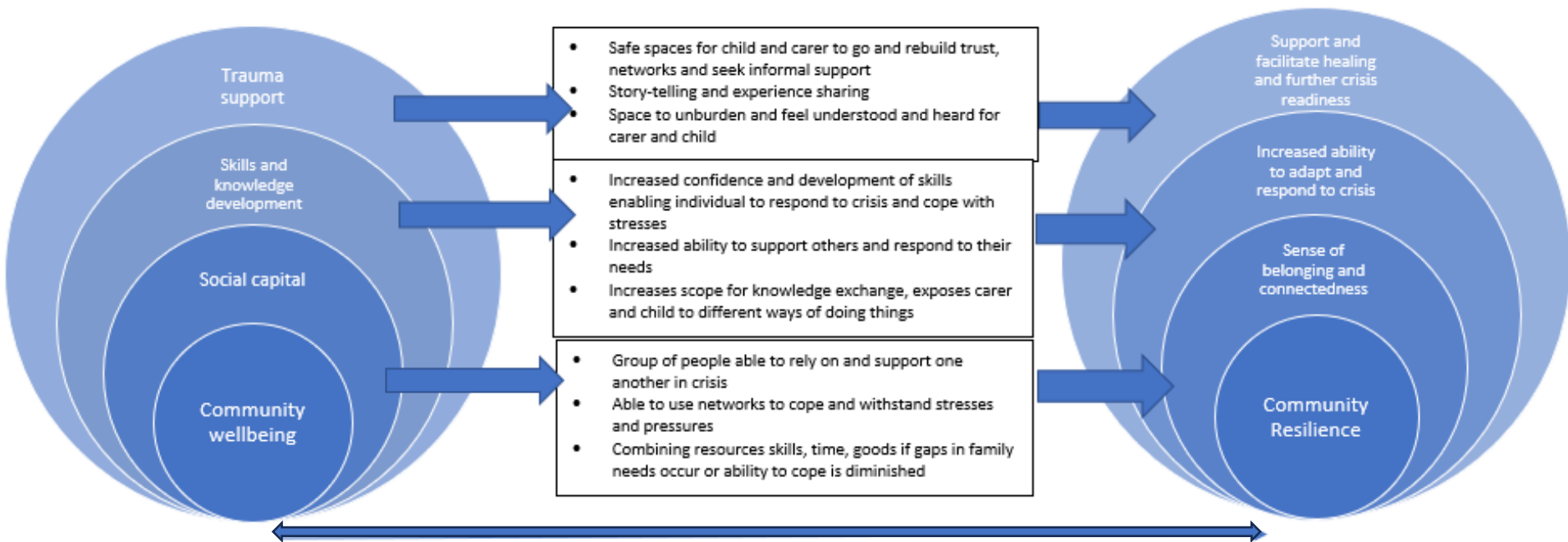
Exposure to community
parenting, helping develop
trust in other adults – widens
their safety net

Opportunities for parents to
observe other children's
behaviour and parenting styles

Opportunities to observe (and
celebrate!) developmental
changes in behaviour over
time (parent support)

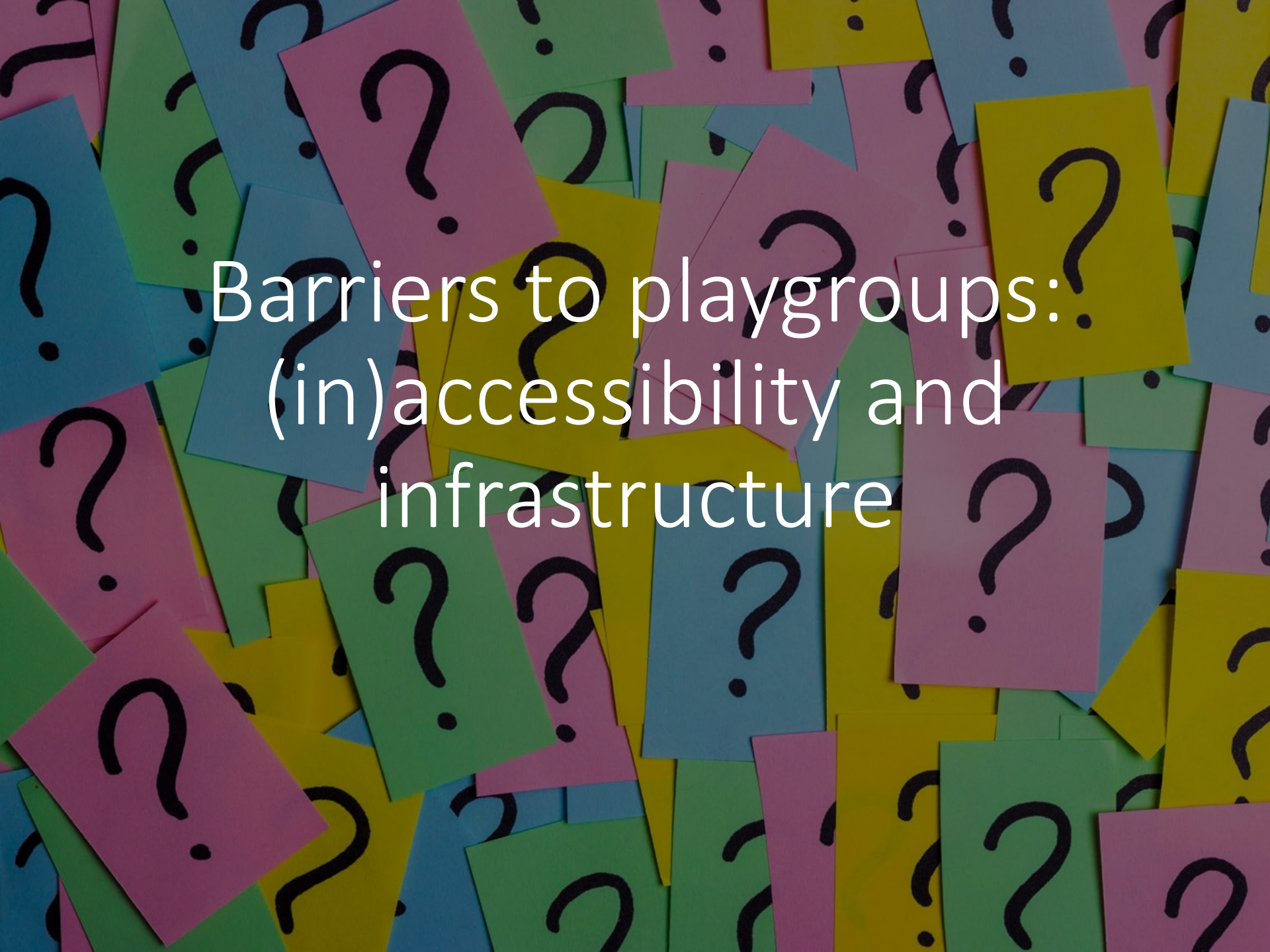
It's really nice to see her interact, like good and bad, with kids as they sort of fight over toys, and share, and try and work out these things together. And that's obviously a really necessary part of their development, although it's sometimes really hard to watch.

What role can playgroups play in community wellbeing and resilience in the everyday?



Playgroups: Women's invisible role in supporting families within the community



The background of the slide is a dense, overlapping collage of numerous small, rectangular sticky notes. These notes are in various colors, including shades of blue, green, yellow, and pink. Each sticky note features a large, bold, black question mark. The notes are scattered across the entire frame, creating a textured and visually busy background.

Barriers to playgroups:
(in)accessibility and
infrastructure

Gender

- Women predominantly volunteer and attend playgroups
- Designed and shaped for their needs
- Men seem to prefer to socialise differently with their children than women
- Women work hard to embed their whole family within the community

Future proofing: Do men and women want / need different things from outdoor spaces when caring for children? (Alarcón-García et al. 2024 says yes!)

...dads are strange creatures. They won't really interact with each other unless you really force the matter.



In some ways I do feel I'm a man in a woman's space.

Accessibility

- Decreasing number of volunteers
- Shutting of key services – libraries, community centres, museums etc
- Transport difficulties
- Cost: playgroup, transport, outdoor necessities

Future proofing:

- Support and invest in volunteers
- Valuing community spaces
- More women in local politics or better representation
- Subsidise, free services



*I'm not going [to playgroup]
at the moment because
I don't drive.*

Weather

- Lack of outdoor spaces
- Lack of access to wet weather gear, concern about heat
- Nowhere to dry clothes, buggies (Naughton-Doe et al. 2025)

Future proofing:

- Need to consider how climate change is going to create additional problems ie increased rain fall, flooding, heat related illness, pollution, lack of green space or appropriate play areas

In Scotland and Ireland you don't have the weather.

We live in Scotland... it's very difficult to meet regularly at the park.

Infrastructure

- Navigating public transport (timings, distance, cost)
- Crossing busy roads and unfit pavements
- Suitable spaces
 - Intimidating and unknown buildings
 - Access to changing/feeding spaces
 - Parks and outdoor spaces
- **Future proofing:**
- Feminist urban planning
- Public policy
- Co-design with users

12:44



Polite request to please park considerably at the station. This van is blocking a wheelchair user passing and there is no way to get off the payment to go around it. A 'walk' ruined! 🙄

Write a comment...



Concluding remarks



Playgroups able to provide a valuable service to community and wider society – skilled volunteers, community leaders, better supported and connected families



Playgroup members have the capacity and inclination to adapt in a crisis, be responsive to members, able to rely on skills, and tap into other formal orgs and institutions



Playgroups provide a good case study for exploring infrastructure, community and wellbeing, and examining future proofing

Sharing the findings:



Scottish Affairs 33.3 (2024): 332–354
DOI: 10.3366/scot.2024.0512
© Edinburgh University Press
www.eupublishing.com/scot

WOMEN'S ROLE IN INFORMAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS: SUPPORTING FAMILIES AND CREATING COMMUNITIES IN PARENT AND BABY GROUPS IN SCOTLAND

Ruth Lightbody

Abstract

This article presents findings from two case studies examining the experiences of participants and volunteers in parent/carer and baby groups (playgroups) in Scotland. Through a detailed case study analysis – using participatory observation and a series of semi-structured interviews – this research finds that playgroups: 1) support the development of social capital through long-term connections and sense of belonging and wellbeing; 2) enhance community voluntarism and reciprocity, through capacity building; and 3) develop the skills and confidence of their members related to child development through playgroups importance and storytelling. It is further contended that despite social outcomes, these groups, and the women that run them, have been marginalised as researchers focus attention on more formal early years education and child development. This research highlights an important gap in knowledge and focus from social scientists on informal settings and women's invisible labour, which take place every day and in every community in Scotland.

PLAYGROUPS AS 'A SAFE SPACE' FOR PARENTS AND FAMILIES: THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY BASED SOCIAL SUPPORT IN THE EARLY YEARS

Ruth Lightbody and Heather Oliver



thrive at five Creating a village: making playgroups a safe space for all parents and carers



By Dr Ruth Lightbody

Why playgroups matter

Parent, carer and baby groups (often referred to as playgroups) take place every day in communities across the UK. They are run by volunteers, parents, churches, organisations, private businesses and charities.



Playgroups are struggling to survive – here's why we need them

Published: October 12, 2023 6:14
Ruth Lightbody



Thanks for listening!

Further reading:

