

# Safe Communities Start in the Early Years

Submission to the Review of Criminal Law Protections  
Against the Incitement of Hatred

August 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.

About Playgroup NSW .....	4
The Impact of Hatred on Vulnerable Families and Communities .....	4
The Need for Stronger and Broader Criminal Law Protections .....	4
Balancing Free Speech and Protection .....	5
Criminal Law and Social Cohesion .....	5
Playgroups as a Foundation for Anti-Hatred and Inclusion .....	5
Recommendations .....	6
1. Expand the new incitement offence to protect vulnerable groups beyond race.....	6
2. Ensure enforcement is culture and trauma-informed, especially for marginalised families. ....	6
3. Invest in playgroups and other soft-entry programs that promote connection and inclusion. ....	6
4. Include child rights and family wellbeing perspectives in any future consultations on reform. ....	6
Conclusion.....	6
Our Impact: Playgroup NSW .....	7

## About Playgroup NSW

Playgroup NSW is the peak body for supported and community playgroups across New South Wales. Each year, we support over 75,000 families through 600+ playgroups. Our work spans rural and remote areas, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, parents with disability, families living with disadvantage, and children in out-of-home care.

Playgroups are unique in that they engage both children and caregivers, providing connection, learning, peer support, and early intervention in a safe, inclusive environment. As a place-based and community-led model, playgroups play a quiet but powerful role in preventing social isolation and promoting belonging and wellbeing.

## The Impact of Hatred on Vulnerable Families and Communities

Hate-based conduct and incitement have devastating consequences for the families we support. Many parents and caregivers at playgroups report experiencing discrimination based on race, religion, disability, language, or cultural background.

The impacts include:

- Withdrawal from public spaces, including early childhood settings
- Diminished mental health and wellbeing
- Reduced access to services and social participation for both parent and child

We note that marginalised families—especially those experiencing intersectional disadvantage—may be especially vulnerable to public acts of incitement and vilification. These harms are often silent, invisible, and cumulative.

## The Need for Stronger and Broader Criminal Law Protections

We support the intent behind the Crimes Amendment (Inciting Racial Hatred) Act 2025. However, we encourage the expansion of protections beyond race to include:

- Religion
- Disability
- Gender identity
- Sexual orientation
- Parental status and carer responsibilities

The families we support do not experience discrimination in isolation. Many face multiple forms of hate or hostility. Criminal law should reflect this intersectionality and provide equitable protection.

We also recommend:

- Clearer definitions of "incitement" and "hatred" to guide enforcement
- Ongoing education and guidance for police and prosecutors
- Simplified reporting mechanisms and community education about protections

## Balancing Free Speech and Protection

Playgroup NSW recognises the importance of free speech, political communication, and freedom of religion. However, these rights must be balanced against the right of children and families to live free from hate, violence, and fear.

We support the inclusion of safeguards (e.g., intention thresholds, public act requirements, and religious exemptions) that maintain this balance while ensuring that protections are not diluted.

## Criminal Law and Social Cohesion

Playgroups are foundational to building social cohesion in communities. They demonstrate daily that respectful connection across difference is not only possible, but powerful. Criminal law alone is not enough to prevent hate—but it plays an important symbolic and deterrent role. Law reform should sit alongside investment in:

- Preventative education, especially in the early years
- Peer-led programs that build empathy and reduce prejudice
- Capacity-building in community organisations (e.g., playgroups) to promote inclusion

## Playgroups as a Foundation for Anti-Hatred and Inclusion

Playgroups are one of the earliest environments where children and families encounter diversity in a structured yet informal setting. They offer a unique opportunity to model and reinforce inclusive behaviours from the start of life. Through shared play, respectful interactions, and parent-to-parent connection, playgroups lay the groundwork for empathy, respect, and belonging.

By bringing together families from all walks of life—across culture, language, ability, religion, and family structure—playgroups naturally counteract prejudice and isolation. They demonstrate, at the earliest stage, what inclusive community looks like in practice.

With the right support, playgroups can also actively showcase anti-hatred messaging, provide peer-led learning around discrimination, and build capacity among volunteers and facilitators to respond to and prevent bias. In this way, playgroups contribute not only to child development and family wellbeing, but also to a more cohesive and respectful society.

## Recommendations

1. Expand the new incitement offence to protect vulnerable groups beyond race.
2. Ensure enforcement is culture and trauma-informed, especially for marginalised families.
3. Invest in playgroups and other soft-entry programs that promote connection and inclusion.
4. Include child rights and family wellbeing perspectives in any future consultations on reform.

## Conclusion

Hate has no place in the lives of children, families, or communities. Playgroup NSW supports strong, inclusive laws that protect against incitement and discrimination—while also recognising the vital role of early prevention. By fostering connection, empathy and belonging from the earliest years, playgroups help build a safer, more cohesive New South Wales for all. We welcome this Review and urge continued investment in both legal protections and community-based solutions.



## 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 Vision:** Our vision is to ensure every child in NSW has the opportunity to thrive, learn and play.

**Our Purpose:** Playgroup NSW is the peak body for playgroup and parent support services, advocating for and supporting playgroup and parent support services across NSW.

**Our Values:** Act with integrity, be inclusive and respectful of the needs of all, be transparent and accountable, and be innovative. We are committed to providing a safe, secure and supportive environment for all.

**Our Programs:** We deliver our programs through our Playgroup program areas:

- Parent Leadership Building
- Playgroup for the Future
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
- Universal & Community Led
- Playgroup (for those 18-25 months and mental health)
- Disability & Inclusion
- Transition Play: Intergenerational
- Culture & Linguistically Diverse
- Rural & Remote

**Our Priorities:**

- Our priority is to ensure every child in NSW has the opportunity to thrive, learn and play.**
  - 1. Strengthen parent support capacity and ensure through resources, targeted and generalised services.
  - 2. Facilitate parent child development, ensuring deep opportunities for education, health and wellbeing, and pathways to early learning.
  - 3. Create equal opportunities for all children and families to access playgroup and parent support services, ensuring accessibility, equity, safety and quality of the service.
  - 4. Build capacity for the future to develop and sustain playgroup, ensure and families, with culture, equity and quality at the centre of services.
  - 5. Create environment and resources (including content) to help and support families.
- Our priority is to ensure every parent in NSW has the opportunity to thrive, learn and play.**
  - 1. Be a leading voice and contributor to the development of the early years system.
  - 2. Represent the needs of parents and our community to government and other key stakeholders.
  - 3. Advocate for and ensure services that address the needs of parents, all children.
  - 4. Deliver culturally appropriate services with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and organisations.
  - 5. Support all Australian-wide networks to strengthen each other.
- Our priority is to ensure every service in NSW has the opportunity to thrive, learn and play.**
  - 1. Ensure children safety, diversity and inclusion, accessibility.
  - 2. Continue flexible, adaptable, collaborative, innovative.
  - 3. Provide opportunities for intergenerational, intersectoral and multidisciplinary.
  - 4. Be open to new and innovative practices.
  - 5. Continue our commitment to development, diversity and inclusion, equity and quality of the service.
  - 6. Encourage a culture of innovation, parent leadership.

**Our strategy is underpinned by a continued focus on our foundational capabilities:**

1. Building community service brand
2. Quality assurance & impact measurement
3. Financial & business sustainability
4. Digital engagement & stakeholder

**OUR STRATEGIC PLAN**



**OUR LEADERSHIP TEAM**



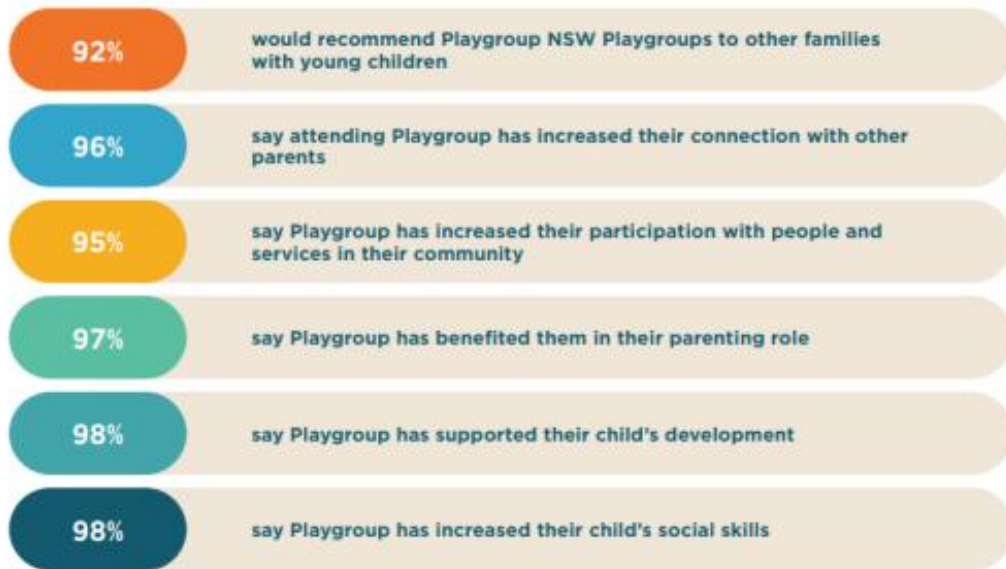
Kellie Murray, Chief First Nations Officer  
 Steve Moore, Chief Operating Officer  
 Emily Caska, Chief Executive Officer  
 Jennifer Kemp, Chief Social Impact Officer







## OUR EVIDENCE BASED PROGRAMS





## 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

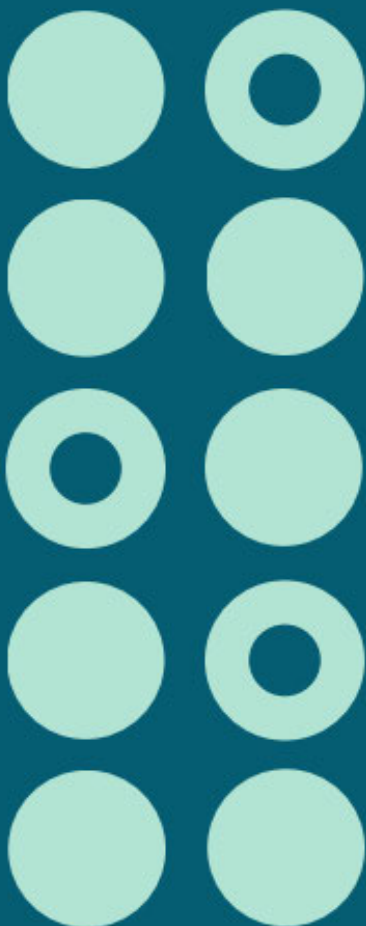
Playgroup NSW is leading the future of playgroups, innovative in our approaches across community and supported groups to reach dads, multicultural families, vulnerable cohorts, remote communities, Aboriginal families and children in non-traditional settings such as out of home care and adoptive families

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 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





**Emily Caska**  
Chief Executive Officer



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