

# **Supporting Playcentres in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**A report for the New Zealand Playcentre Federation**

**By**

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## **Executive Summary**

Playcentre is a unique part of the early childhood education (ECE) and family support sectors. It provides holistic programmes based around the whole family, rather than just the child and where education is seen as an integral part of life rather than something that occurs only in an institutional context.

The purpose of this report is to provide a factual basis for understanding the needs of Playcentre and suggestions on how the Government and Playcentre Federation can support Playcentres and ensure their long term viability.

The first chapter of the report provides background on Playcentre and how it works. The second and third chapters outline the results of our research on the costs of providing Playcentre, and the issues currently affecting centres and the Playcentre movement.

### ***Understanding Playcentre***

The focus of Playcentre is families, not just children aged 0-6 years old. Playcentre supports parents and parenting. Parenting is a fundamental process in the reproduction of society and a complex collection of skills, attitudes and applied knowledge. Good parenting is work, and has important consequences. The impact of the family is greater than the impact of early childhood education for children's long term outcomes.

Parents require a range of support at different stages through their life. Parenting support is particularly important in a modern mobile society with the loss of extended family links and networks. This support is a key competency of Playcentre. The literature suggests that parenting support works best where it :

- 1 builds relationships among parents, and with service providers;
- 2 is empowering of parents to make decisions and to support each other;
- 3 occurs within a 'flat' structural hierarchy among participants;
- 4 creates and strengthens networks among parents;
- 5 is responsive to parents' current needs.

Playcentre nationwide is based on a unifying philosophy. This philosophy emphasises:

- 1 education provision by the parents of children attending the centre;
- 2 equal priority to education and support of families;
- 3 that education continues in the home and community and not just the centre;
- 4 the creation of a learning and supportive community.

Playcentre not only produces good outcomes for the children attending, it also supports positive outcomes for parents, communities and the early childhood education sector as a whole. The strengths of Playcentre are the same factors that research show to be key to good outcomes for children in the early years. Over a third of all Playcentre members (about 3,900 out of 11,000) completed courses of training in 2007, with some parents reporting that the Playcentre training has given them the confidence to move on to other forms of education. Playcentre has provided a key pathway into the early childhood education sector, and published many resources used throughout the sector. Finally, Playcentres have played key roles in building social capital and strengthening communities, especially in rural areas.

### ***Playcentre in 2008***

There are approximately 500 Playcentres (counting unlicensed centres) operating in 33 associations. These include many rural and small town centres (48 percent are rural and 12 percent in small towns).

Playcentres are organised into 33 local associations, which provide the adult education programmes and a range of other services to their member associations. The New Zealand Playcentre Federation provides the overall framework and supports for these associations.

The average cost per child hour of providing Playcentre is \$5.97, with \$3.85, or 65 percent, coming from bulk funding. It is important to include the costs of providing Playcentre Association Services (funded out of levies on centres) in the costs of providing Playcentre, as they provide many and varied vital services. It appears that the Ministry of Education has not included levies in its calculations on the costs of Playcentre in the 2006 operation costs survey, leading to an inaccurate perception that the Government supports Playcentre to a greater degree than it does.

The cost of providing Playcentre does not vary significantly according to the age mix at a particular centre. The cost of providing one hour of Playcentre to an under-2 is 1.2 times the cost for older children, as compared with between 2 and 2.9 times the cost for services which have to employ additional teachers for younger children.

The Government has not offered an adequate reason for excluding Playcentre from its 20 free hours policy.

We calculated what it would cost for Playcentre to be included in the policy. On our calculations, under 2-year-olds cost 1.2 times as much for session time than over 2s. Assuming the 1.2 cost multiple, the rate that would meet the costs for Playcentre children to access the 20 free funding policy would be \$5.73 (an additional \$2.26 an hour, or \$3.7 million per year). Assuming the multiplier used for services currently covered by the policy, the rate would be \$4.76, for an additional subsidy of \$1.29 and a total of \$2.1 million per year.

In addition, Playcentre members contribute their time. The major complaints recorded from centres were about the amount of time required to carry out activities outside of the core educational ones. On average for each centre, volunteers contribute a total of 1300 hours annually for administration, cleaning, meetings, fundraising and working bees. A further 879 hours of volunteer time per centre are required to provide Association services to centres.

Playcentre members are particularly concerned about how the 20 free hours policy and Government statements about work and early childhood education have created an environment where parents have to justify any decision to contribute to their children's education.

### ***Supporting Playcentres***

Playcentre associations play a vital role in the operation of the Playcentre movement.

There are three main varieties of support that centres may require. These are programme support, administrative and practical support, and what we call structural support. Programme support refers to interventions which are directly related to the educational programmes provided either in Playcentres or to Playcentre parents.

Administrative and practical support includes many and various jobs required to ensure that operating, funding and licensing requirements are met. Structural support ensures continuity of institutional knowledge and support for Centre dynamics.

All associations responding to the questionnaire provided programme support to some degree as well as some structural support. However the levels of support and institutional arrangements vary. One association had near full-time workers responsible for six or seven centres each, while others had a much more limited level of volunteer coverage. Administrative and practical support was also variable.

The major barriers to associations extending greater support to the centres were:

- cost;
- a limited pool of people with the requisite skills and experience;
- travel and distance in rural areas;
- lack of office space; and
- over commitment of volunteers.

However, where Associations have been able to provide professional support there have been some notable examples of success, including creating viability for centres which were on the verge of closure.

Centres and associations raised several issues where government support, or removal of government obstacles, could make a difference for Playcentre:

- inclusion of Playcentre in the 20 free hours scheme;
- recognition of the quality of Playcentre education;
- recognising the positive role that full-time parents make to society and their children;
- reducing regulation and paperwork requirements; and
- avoiding creating new problems with future regulatory changes.

The government has created problems for Playcentres with policy and regulatory settings. These have included:

- positioning teacher training and qualifications as virtually the only significant dimension of early childhood education quality;
- constantly increasing administrative burdens; and
- exclusion of Playcentre from initiatives such as the 20 free hours policy.

## ***Recommendations***

We recommend that:

- a. The Ministry of Education change its funding model for Playcentre to recognise the vital role that Associations play in the operation of Playcentres;
- b. Playcentre be included in the 20 free hours policy for 3- and 4-year-olds;
- c. The Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Playcentre Federation negotiate funding for administration and centre support workers at a level of 5 hours per week per centre for each of these functions, including non-licensed Playcentres;

- d. Playcentres and Playcentre Associations consider the use of commercial cleaners to reduce the stress for centre members involved in carrying out cleaning and maintenance functions.
- e. The New Zealand Playcentre Federation and the Ministry of Education consider whether bulk funding rates for Playcentres should be altered to recognise that over 2-year-olds make up a higher proportion of costs than would be found in teacher led services

# 1 Understanding Playcentre

The first section of this report provides some background information about Playcentre to enable decision makers to understand how Playcentre works. It focuses on the fact that Playcentre is more than an early childhood education service. It is, in the first instance, an organisation of *families* which provides education for both parents and children and structures to support parents.

## 1.1 Parenting

Raising children is a process fundamental to the on-going health of society. It is an experience shared by the great majority of adults in our society. Raising a child well is also an awesome responsibility. Becoming a parent “can be one of the most significant and challenging roles a person will face in their life. It can sometimes feel like you're expected to have all the answers and be there to help everyone” (Families Commission, n.d.). Parenting, defined as “all the skills and experience of bringing up children” (Collins Concise Dictionary) is, in fact, a complex collection of skills, attitudes and applied knowledge, which requires constant adaptation and new learning as the age of children increase.

Good parenting is work – it requires effort and attention, and it has important consequences. The time and effort that parents put into children's upbringing should not be underestimated, but all too often is. Parents educate their children, with learning in the early years being primarily from family contexts, supplemented by early childhood education services and community members. Parents provide love and care. They cook, clean, entertain, transport and protect their children. They introduce them to both the routine and the special functions of their family and community culture. It is a job that offers no holidays, 24 hours on-call and little time off. All of these parenting tasks are very real work, despite being unrecognised as contributions to New Zealand's GDP.

Parenting is commonly learned from memories of how we were raised ourselves. As a result of their childhood experiences an individual may choose to replicate, or reject, an approach taken by their own parents. The opportunity to interact with other parents, observe some of the things they do, and discuss child raising issues may offer new options for general, or more specific, parenting skills or attitudes which the parent can then consider adopting. However, when under pressure a parent may find themselves repeating a pattern they wish to reject. Access to robust support networks helps parent to say 'on track' during the hard times.

Parenting practices make a huge difference to children's development and outcomes. In a review of New Zealand and international research, Farquhar (2008) found that “according to the best evidence, the impact of the family is much greater than the impact of childcare/ECE” in children's long term outcomes. This finding was independent of the measured quality of the ECE setting. Some of the things which parents do include: reading to their children; taking them to church meetings; talking about ancestors; holding them close; taking them to the markets; playing games and laughing; teaching them good manners; letting them 'help' fix the car. These and many many more parenting practices and activities build within children an irreplaceable resource: a sure knowledge of belonging to this family and within their own culture.

### 1.1.1 Supporting Parenting

Parenting is a learned set of skills and attributes, and one which must develop and grow as the children change and grow. But while parents want to do the best they can for their children, good parenting doesn't just happen automatically or in isolation. Parenting is widely understood as a normal process which is learned from one's own parents and other role models with young children (Shulruf, 2005). This occurs through remembering childhood experience, getting advice and practical support from family members once a new child arrives, and watching how other people interact with their own children, as well as through access to books and other written material (Davis, 1999). Examples thus gained can provide a model to follow – or to reject and modify (Biddulph & Biddulph, 2000). Family and whānau, along with friends and organisations such as churches, early childhood groups and neighbourhoods, form 'naturally occurring support networks' which enable parents to access a wide range of information and support (Munford & Sanders, 1999). Parents with robust access to such networks are likely to be strong and resilient (p. 94).

Parents require a range of support, and the support they need is likely to be different at different times in their parenting. As well as information and practical advice on the care and well being of their child, Biddulph and Biddulph (2000) explain that parents need “inspiration that it is all worthwhile and has a purpose”, and need to “feel connected to other parents and their joys and struggles so that [they] can feel that [they] are normal and that [they] have friends around [them]” (p. 28). There is a broad range of support available to parents and those with parenting responsibilities. In our modern mobile society, parents may live at a distance from extended family, and may have friends who have not had children yet, limiting their access to support from these networks (Seth-Purdie, Cameron & Luketina, 2006). Community contacts and organisations provide support for parents, sometimes as core practice (such as the advice on practical baby-care provided by Plunket nurses) and sometimes alongside other activities (for example, parent conversations while watching children's sports). Researchers are becoming more aware of the importance of early childhood centres as sites of support for parenting (Dalli, 1997; Duncan & Bowden, 2004; Powell, 2005; Duncan, Bowden & Smith, 2006; Thesing, 2008, Podmore & Te One, 2008).

Playcentre sees parent support as key to its approach to education and to its effectiveness. Beginning in 1941, Playcentre had the dual purpose of providing education for children and support for mothers during the war (Stover, 1998). This dual focus has remained constant throughout the development of the Playcentre movement, and is a fundamental principle of its philosophy (Burke, 2008). In Playcentre, children are educated by trained groups of volunteer parents, so training in child development and pedagogy is a constant necessity. But the practice of parents working together in teams, with more experienced parents alongside new parents, and with structured opportunities for discussion and reflection on children's learning, means that parent support goes far beyond the formal parent education programme.

### 1.1.2 Literature on parent support

*Parent support* is a wide term which is used to cover general or specific support of parenting provided by informal or formal community networks and by parenting programmes. It can include information, emotional support, skill development, practical help, reflection and reassurance, and access to specialist skills such as medical services. This section looks at the wider literature on supporting parents in New Zealand, and then specifically at how this is experienced by parents within the Playcentre setting.

Parent support is discussed in literature as including elements of information, skill development, parent education, and reassurance or emotional support for parents. While parenting has traditionally been understood as occurring within a web of community relationships and groups, literature, especially that addressing the social work and education professional audiences, has tended to focus on ways to effectively support at-risk parents (for example, Kerlake Hendricks & Balakrishnan, 2005; Shulruf, 2005). While support for such families is vital, an approach focused on the targeted actions of professionals runs the risk of obscuring the possibility that, had families had robust access to 'naturally occurring support networks' the same level of parenting programmes may not have been needed (Munford & Sanders, 1999).

Many writers make a distinction between parent support and parenting programmes. The latter tend to be run by professionals or quasi-professionals and aimed at high-risk groups, with the aim of improving parent and child outcomes through education and relationship development. In discussing the concept of parent support, Powell (1997) emphasises family context and parent empowerment. "There are two basic ways the concept of parent support represents an advance in approaches to working with parents: parents are viewed within their family, community, economic, and cultural contexts (versus isolating parents from their environments); and parent and family strengths are emphasised (versus focusing on professionally-determined needs and weaknesses of parent and family)" (p. 9). A support programme focused on family context and empowerment is likely to involve parents being actively involved in decisions about the programme to meet their current needs, and encourage the building of mutually supportive relationships among parents and between parents and support workers. Building on parent strengths, programmes may place parents in powerful roles, such as role models for other parents.

This reliance on family context and parent empowerment aims to avoid a risk associated with professional directed support. Powell (1997) notes "the parent support concept also is an outgrowth of serious criticisms of the dominant assumption that professionals and other people in power are in the best position to determine what parents need. Further, the deficit orientation of most professional helping strategies – that is, focusing on weaknesses or limitations, rather than building on assets – was criticised as creating unhealthy, paternalistic power imbalances in relationships between professionals and parents, including the fostering of parent dependence on experts" (p. 10). Powell further comments that the gains made by a support programme can become long term when the focus is on building stable and ongoing networks among programme participants and community groups and individuals.

Parent support may mean different things to those giving, and those receiving, the support. In her investigation of how parents were supported in different early childhood centres, Thesing (2008) noted that teachers and mothers had quite different understandings of what constituted 'support'. Mothers "tend to perceive support to be a combination of empathy, practical help and wide spectrum knowledge that are gained through participation in social processes within their centres. ... Conversely, teachers, it seems, believe support to be narrowly confined to discrete parent education packages, delivered by teachers through passive processes, rather than being a product of the wider community. Teachers consider their role with parents to be one of disseminators of trained information, whereby they 'give' support to parents as passive recipients." (Thesing, 2008, p. 66). Parent support includes, but is much more than, the provision of information. Dalli (1997) contrasts parent support with parent education. The former is "based on a philosophy of empowering parents

to recognise and use their strengths”; the latter tending to be where 'experts' are charged with doing the 'educating' while parents do the 'receiving' (p. 21).

Support is also responsive to the diverse and changing needs of parents, which implies well developed relationships between participants. While information, given in a timely fashion is important, Dalli (1997) suggests parent support, as provided by centre staff, should be characterised as an attitude when working with parents: “given the diversity of circumstances that families experience, the chances are that their need for support will likewise be diverse. It therefore seems logical to think of parent support primarily in terms of an approach or attitude to parent-centre relationships” (p. 23). With this attitude, staff are genuinely interested in developing a relationship with parents in the centre, so that any information or support provided by the staff is responsive to the parent. Further, Duncan (2008) notes that where this relationship has been developed the parent is likely to approach the staff member at an early point for specific information or support: “If I had to go to someone I would rather go to someone I did know. I would go to the teachers first off. Even once the children have finished there, if I knew that the teachers could help them somehow I wouldn't hesitate. And I know they would be willing to put me on to the right people and they wouldn't put me wrong. I trust them. (Parent #19)” (Duncan, 2008).

The defining characteristics of effective support for parenting therefore appear to be those which:

- 1 build relationships among parents, and with service providers;
- 2 empower parents to make decisions and to support each other;
- 3 occur within a 'flat' structural hierarchy among participants;
- 4 create and strengthen networks among parents;
- 5 are responsive to parents' current needs.

How support is delivered also appears to make important differences to how well it is received and how effective it is. Processes and systems which facilitate the building of mutual, responsive relationships are essential, and support is experienced through informal interactions and events as well as formal processes.

Effective support relies on responsive relationships between participants, so structures and events which facilitate such relationships can provide support in themselves as well as providing the conditions for effective future support. Programmes and groups which invite and enable individuals to participate and make friendships are likely to have a function of parent support. For example, a Plunket new mothers' support group which runs for eight weekly discussions may allow mothers to make friendships which continue to provide support after the life of the group.

A trend within recent literature has been to see early childhood centres as an important site for parent support. The early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) notes that early childhood centres are “increasingly recognised as providing support to families as well as education for their children” (p. 17). Centres provide support by sharing the responsibility for parenting and giving parents time for other activities (Dalli, 1997). They also provide a site within the community where parents can meet others also concerned with raising young children. With more mobile modern lifestyles families are likely to live away from extended family. This has led to an increase in reliance on community education services – such as Playcentres, community kindergartens and crèches – as support networks for parents (Duncan, 2008). They are a focal point in the community when other focal points (e.g., post office, small school) may have been removed.

While the early childhood centre is primarily concerned with children's education, social events and activities can be key structures which enable parents to meet and form supportive friendships with each other. Duncan et al (2006) comment that "centre-organised social events and activities (e.g., fund-raisers, working bees, cultural nights, shared meals) appeared to be a successful means of connecting families" (p. 9). The value of these structures to parents is apparent when parents can decide how frequent they will be. In her exploration of how parents perceive support in several different early childhood centres, Thesing (2006) noted that: "planned social activities in the Kindergartens and Playgroup were very infrequent compared with the number deemed necessary in the Playcentre when mothers made their own decisions. Whilst the high degree of social activity was related to the intense commitment expected of Playcentre mothers, it is still suggested that other services were not as responsive to mothers' social needs in terms of the obvious frequency of interaction required to build the appropriate degree of support" (p. 132). The relationships thus developed have the feature of reciprocity – mutual support between equals. "One person can be supported at one time and supporting at another. It's affirming and empowering" (Rokx, 1997).

The opportunity to be involved in a group with other parents allowed parents to observe others as role models, and learn from them if they wished. In a Playcentre setting, parent educators commented that they "valued the opportunity to watch other ways of working with children: 'You pick up so much from others' modelling. You do get drawn into it. You see the skills and techniques'" (van Wijk, 2007, p. 59). Role modelling can occur alongside other group goals. Reflecting on the learning for parents in a session for first time parents and their infants, Podmore and Te One (2008) comment: "The SPACE sessions were designed to foster a culture of care amongst all participants. ... What has become evident during this research is the importance of role modelling. Parents acted as role models for one another, and the facilitators, and the guest speakers also became role models" (p. 76).

The second factor which appears to dominate in how support was delivered was the theme that support can be both informal and formal. In her study, Thesing (2006) identified two themes of effective parent support: firstly, support is contingent upon mothers own activity in building social networks and contributing to the centre community" (p. 70). Secondly, support is both formal and informal: "the integrated nature of informal processes was more responsive to mothers' support requirements for relationship building and contribution than teachers' pre-planned formal educational packages" (p. 70). The early childhood centres in her study acted as community meeting places for the parents to develop friendships with both other parents and with staff, which led to opportunities for mutual support. The parents identified that it was the informal occasions, rather than formal education workshops provided by the staff, which offered them most support. This finding was confirmed in a study of three early childhood centres by Duncan, Bowden and Smith (2006): "Importantly, families explained to us that they preferred to have informal contact with staff, rather than to be offered formal educational/training opportunities. " (p. 2).

The knowledge which staff, or more experienced parent-educators, have is appreciated by parents, but "the real benefit lies in the support being dynamically responsive, rather than static, to mothers' ever changing needs. Mothers are particularly attracted to information through exchanges with other mothers because of its authenticity as personal experiences" (Thesing, 2008, p. 68). The times when the staff changed roles and slipped into a 'parent' role (in discussion, say) were effective for parent support because "support comes from people in the same sort of relationships. You know you're more likely to open up to people you identify with in a similar situation ... Mothers were able to view the teachers outside their formal role

because they heard them identify with the same experiences they had themselves, so they believed their difficulties were shared and therefore understood" (Thesing, 2006, p. 120).

In contrast, formal support which the teachers planned and offered parents, such as seminars offered in the evenings, were not successful in providing support due to poor attendance. The reasons identified for this were that parents were focused on the tasks of daily survival, too tired from working or caring for their children, or the seminars were not seen as relevant by the parents (Duncan, Bowden & Smith, 2006, p. 6). Poor attendance occurred even when some parents had suggested the topic for the seminar. In addressing the question of lack of attendance at formal parent education events, Thesing (2006) noted that the teachers' child-focus meant that their planned parent support was a very secondary focus, as well as an extra call on their time. She notes: "The problem was the way teachers used their status by excluding parents from all managerial decision making. As a consequence of low levels of meaningful discussion, teachers did not get to hear parents' perspectives, so they neither understood how they gained support nor to what degree the centre needed to be responsive" (Thesing, 2008, p. 70). So, formal parent support events in the early childhood centres might be effective if teachers allowed themselves to be used as a resource by parents, but it was more likely to be effective if staff were available for regular informal interactions with parents.

Parent support programmes on their own are not sufficient to effect lasting changes for families with multiple needs (Powell, 1997; Duncan, Bowden & Smith, 2005). These families may already have reduced access to naturally occurring support networks due to factors such as high mobility, and inexperience with healthy, naturally occurring relationships, and may further alienate themselves from support networks, for example, to disguise abuse (Munford & Sanders, 1999) These families may need wide ranging support, including in health, housing and finance, before they are able to focus attention on changing child rearing patterns (Livingston, 1998). However, an important step is for such families to be helped to identify an area where they are succeeding in order to give encouragement and hope that change is possible; the family's priority may not be the same as a professional support worker (Munford & Sanders, 1999). If a trustful relationship is built with, for example, early childhood centre members or staff, then it may be possible to encourage them to access appropriate agencies or professionals (Dalli, 1997; Duncan, Bowden & Smith, 2005; Podmore & Te One, 2008).

Parent support provides reassurance for parents in the daily role of raising their children. Cummings (2001) writes about the experience of facilitating a weekly parent discussion group associated with the Pen Green centre in England. She notes one parent who said "going to the group itself was about making new friendships and also just about being able to get things off your chest and being reassured as to why the children were doing things rather than bottling everything up, talking to people who understood as well" (p. 120-1). The process of talking through child rearing issues with peers was enough to be experienced as supportive, without information or advice being required. Duncan and Bowden (2004) also identify one of the aspects of support which early childhood centres can provide is to "reassure parents about their children and their parenting" by linking them into a shared community with other families (p. 43).

Making connections with other parents is also important in order for relationships with other parents to develop and to then be available for mutual support of each other. Enrolment in early childhood centres facilitates meeting other parents, but making connections might be more or less easy depending on the structure of the centre. In

their study of three early childhood centres (two free kindergartens and a community childcare centre), Duncan, Bowden and Smith (2006) commented on how parents were able to make connections with other parents: “There were three main structured opportunities at the centres for parents to meet other parents: participation in the programme, attending social events and activities (or parent education/information evenings), and becoming a member of the parent/management committees” (p. 9). Further, in the childcare centre where parents arrived and left at different times, they were likely to have fewer opportunities to meet and chat to other parents, but to value the connections with parents they did make.

Parents appreciate support networks which help them to achieve cultural goals for their children. The Kohanga Reo movement was started out of a desire to revitalise the Māori language, with a range of community members working together to achieve that aim. Rokx (1997) comments: “We were committed to a common cause of reviving Māori language and customs, and we worked effectively together, in and beyond the Kohanga Reo, to provide support for one another in our quest”. Te Kohanga Reo “provided a whānau support structure to 'mirror' that of traditional times” (p. 19). More generally, Youniss (1994) discusses the way that adults construct and interpret the society around them through their everyday social interactions with other community members. Parents then “appear to adopt practices that they think will best serve their children's future social adaptation” (p. 48).

The literature suggests that effective parent support encourages the building of relationships, both among parents and between parents and professionals, involves reciprocity or mutual support, and often occurs in informal settings and interactions, as well as formal support settings. Further, early childhood centres have increasingly been identified as sites of effective parent support because they bring parents together with a common interest, thus helping them to form relationships, and they are open to everyone in a community. Early childhood centres may be the only community hub where other services, such as post offices or small schools, have been closed (Duncan, 2008). Playcentres include all of these characteristics, often intertwined in such a way that it is difficult to examine them separately. Thesing (2006) noted that an important variable in the support which mothers in her study received was the mothers' expectation of support on joining the centre. “This was highest in the Playcentre as they advertised parent support as a dual goal along with children's programme” (p. 104).

Playcentres draw families together, to work cooperatively for the shared goal of providing education for their children. As such they, in common with other community-based early childhood centres, form a hub in the community for parents to meet. Significantly, 60% of Playcentres are in rural or small town areas (population < 10,000) and the Playcentre is often the only early childhood centre available to provide this community hub service (Powell, 2005; Robertson, 2007). Playcentres have a flexible structure which is able to accommodate differences in community need, so a town which does not have the population base to support a centre with several registered teaching staff is still often able to provide a Playcentre (Woodhams, 2008). The Playcentre model provides the formal structure, such as ways of enacting curriculum, which enables new parents to join and quickly be able to provide good quality education while continuing to learn 'on the job'. At the same time, the value of Playcentre as a community hub was noted by one respondent: “For me, it's seeing all the girls. If it wasn't here there'd be no meeting place – we'd have to go far out of the community (Mitchell et al., 2006, p. 12).

Playcentres are particularly effective at building relationships due to the cooperative nature of their structure. Parents are required to work together in teams to run the

sessions and the centre, and this time, along with role modelling and reflection, contributes to building of relationships among adults. (van Wijk, 2007). A common goal gives members topics of conversation and shared experiences while they get to know each other. Playcentre helps parents form relationships with people who they might not normally mix with. “For many participants Playcentre contributes to a sense of participation and citizenship by providing the opportunity for adults to interact socially with other adults and parents who come from a variety of backgrounds” (Powell, 2005, p. 3). The variety of members in a Playcentre brings a variety of experience and knowledge about professionals who can provide support to families. In her study of several different types of early childhood centre Thesing (2006) noted that mothers were particularly likely to accept support from peer relationships. One mother reported: “You know you're more likely to open up to people you identify with in a similar situation” (p. 120).

Playcentres form sites of mutual support relationships where 'supervisors' or 'team leaders' are usually parents themselves, with older children. Playcentre philosophy includes the conviction that each person brings valuable contributions to the centre, though the level of involvement may be different at different times of family life (Burke, 2008). This valuing of individual parents is highly appreciated by parents: “Parent-educators appreciated that Playcentre values them for their contribution to the community, and their commitment to children and their learning” (van Wijk, 2007, p. 58). Ninety-eight percent of Playcentre members report having made friends at Playcentre, and that they would call on other Playcentre members for a variety of reasons, including to share good news (70%), to talk over a problem (67%) and for support in a crisis (64%) (Powell, 2005). The practice of more experienced members supporting newer members, who would in turn provide this support to members yet to join the Playcentre was appreciated as “generational wisdom, counsel, and learning about organisational culture that is passed on by one generation of members to the next, in conversations as well as through more formal means; (van Wijk, 61)

Playcentre provides both formal and informal modes of support to parents, through the structures involved in inducting new families to Playcentre and the parent education programme, to the relationships and social events which parents plan to meet their own needs. In a Playcentre setting, all the members are responsible for welcoming new families (Manning, 2008), and self review processes are sometimes undertaken by individual Playcentres to empower parents to do this (Sinclair, 2008). Decision making in a Playcentre is by the group of parents themselves, rather than an executive or manager, so the number and type of social events are tailored to the wishes of the parents for such support (Thesing, 2006). Playcentre also has as one of its key goals the provision of parent education. This includes training in skills and attributes for teaching children, such as providing learning through play experiences and providing positive guidance for children. It also includes training in management, group processes, communication, adult education, effective family support and leadership (Playcentre Education Charter). The Playcentre Education Diploma equips parents to run the sessions as cooperative groups, manage the Playcentres, and provides a stream of tutors to conduct the parent education programme.

## **1.2 Playcentre Philosophy**

The Playcentre movement has the overall goal of nurturing and developing families by bringing them together in communities to provide group education for their young children, and support for each other and their parenting. The Playcentre Federation's mission statement is “*Quality early childhood education – a co-operative family/whānau experience.*”

Playcentre achieves this goal through three interconnected activities:

- Providing early childhood education to children aged birth to six years in centres which are managed and staffed by the parents of the attending children, with support from a network of regional associations, and a national Federation.
- Providing parent education in the form of both a formal series of courses leading to an NZQA recognised level six Playcentre Diploma in Early Childhood and Adult Education, and a variety of other educational opportunities, including: other training events; daily team meetings to reflect on learning and teaching practice; and informal discussions and mentoring.
- Providing educational publications to support the education of children, the education of parents and the management of centres.

There are several features which make Playcentre unique among education providers

1. The educational programme in Playcentres is provided primarily by the parents of children attending the centre. There may be a 'supervisor' or 'team leader' who was trained in Playcentre education, and whose children have gone on to school, and this person may be a paid staff member. But most of the adults providing education are volunteer parents, with complementary levels of education training and a wide range of non-education training and life experience.
2. The education and support of parents is given equal priority to the education of children. Playcentre recognises that while parents are providing learning experiences for children, they are also observing and reflecting on how those experiences go, and Playcentre provides both formal and informal ways for parents to do this together each session. Also, Playcentre needs to develop its parent/members to create an educated 'workforce' to run licensed sessions. This imperative makes encouraging training a priority.
3. Playcentre sees education as continuing beyond the hours of involvement within the centre, and continuing into the home and community. The expectation and lived reality is that Playcentre education affects and informs the education which children and their parents receive in their home and elsewhere in the community.
4. Playcentre is much more than an education provider for children and adults – it is a community within the wider community. The contact in session time is only one aspect of this community. Playcentre's structure is based on the supposition that new parents will be welcomed into this community and receive support, and later they will, in their turn, be the experienced parents who provide the community structure and support to a new generation of parents. This community continues to support each other after their children have left Playcentre to start school, by remaining in contact through, for example, school and sporting involvement with their children, and by being a group of trusted peers to discuss new parenting issues which arise as children grow to older childhood and teens.

### **1.3 Quality outcomes**

Playcentre, like other high quality early childhood education services, produces good outcomes for children. In addition to that, Playcentre provides good outcomes for parents, the early childhood sector, and the wider community, through its integrated

goals of adult and child education. Playcentre supports families in their parenting during the early years, and contributes to the development of social capital in individuals. It creates community cohesion through the development of networks and supporting the volunteering ethic essential to running communities at every level. Playcentre also provides a steady stream of adults 'turned on' to education to provide teachers, managers and researchers for the wider early childhood sector.

This section looks at some of the evidence for the positive outcomes for children, parents, the wider early childhood sector, and the wider community which Playcentre contributes.

### **1.3.1 Outcomes for children's education**

Playcentre provides children with a sound education which produces excellent outcomes. As Playcentre is unique to New Zealand, international studies do not include this type of service in their research. One significant study which included participant children and adults from a range of service types, including Playcentre, is the longitudinal *Competent Children Competent Learners* study (Wylie, Thompson & Kerslake Hendricks, 1996). This study measured the learning environment provided in services attended by 307 children aged nearly 5 years in the greater Wellington region against the factors of interaction, self-esteem, programme and resources. Playcentre, Free Kindergarten, childcare centres, home-based care services and A'oga Amata were included in the study, and the Playcentres were judged to be among the high quality centres. These factors were positively associated with children's achievement levels in the several domains covered by the study (cognitive skills, social skills, emotional, learning dispositions, etc.). Playcentre attendance was an advantage for children's perseverance as reported at age 6 (Wylie & Thompson, 1998).

A recent systematic review of the best international evidence for children's development was conducted by Child Forum Research (Farquhar, 2008). Studies were included which reported over the preceding 20 years and which met the following criteria: the study included a control group of children not involved in ECE; the studies were longitudinal; the studies involved 'normal' ECE (for example, not unusually high cost programmes); and the studies involved a random sample of children, or all children in a cohort. This review showed that the impact of the family was much greater than the impact of any early childhood service in children's development (p. 1). In particular, involvement by parents as educators in the programme provided the best outcomes for children (p. 10). Secondly, while some involvement in group education could support the work of the family, attendance in group education for longer than 2.5 hour daily sessions does not improve developmental outcomes for children (p. 14). These findings reflect the conditions within Playcentre, where children attend up to five 2.5 hour sessions per week, and where groups of trained, volunteer parents provide the learning programme, interacting with their own, and others', children, while having access to both formal education and training and informal mentoring and support.

A literature review on the outcomes of early childhood education was conducted by Mitchell, Wylie and Carr for the Ministry of Education (2008). This report agrees that "full-time attendance [at ECE services] has no benefits for cognitive outcomes over part-time attendance in studies of children from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds" (p. 4). The report highlights the aspects of 'good quality' ECE which are "particularly important for outcomes:

- 1 the quality of staff-child interaction;
- 2 the learning resources available'

- 3 programmes that engage children' and
- 4 a supportive environment for children to work together" (p. 5).

All of these can be seen in Playcentre. In their report *Quality in Parent/Whānau -led Services* (2006), Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara and Wylie identify the patterns of strengths for the Playcentres studied, specifically including "the quality of their education programme and interactions between adults and children", "quality and amount of educational resources" (p. 12). More general comments indicate that the Playcentres provided programmes that engaged children by following up on their interests and building on home experiences, and provided a supportive environment for children to work together, including by "using positive explanation and reinforcement to guide children" (p. 12).

Further, Mitchell et al (2008) note that there "were greater cognitive and learning disposition gains for children, and reduced antisocial/worried behaviour, in centres that encouraged parents to be engaged in their children's learning, with a focus on educational aims" (p. 5). Parent engagement in, and in fact responsibility for, their children's learning is one of the defining characteristics of Playcentre, as is supporting parents to succeed in this role.

### **1.3.2 Outcomes for parent education**

Mitchell et al (2008) discuss outcomes of early childhood involvement for parents. Positive outcomes for parenting, such as improved parent/child interactions, home environments, and increased parental knowledge of child learning and development, were found in parent/whānau-led services, which combined good quality ECE with parent education and support. "The four studies in parent-led centres found that parents reported gains for parenting outcomes. In New Zealand, these were greatest in Playcentres, which aim to provide adult education as well as early childhood education, and offer support for adults to learn" (p. 67). Positive outcomes for parent life-course outcomes, such as education and training, social networks and community connection, and confidence and self-esteem, were also noted in the report. "Parent/whānau-led centres and integrated centres seemed to offer wider opportunities for these outcomes" (p. 72). Several of the studies included in the review focus fully or partly on Playcentre. The report notes: "parents responding to a survey in Powell's (2006) Playcentre study reported increased personal knowledge and confidence in assuming Playcentre roles (88 percent), in themselves and their abilities (79 percent), and interactions with other adults (75 percent)" (Mitchell, et al, 2008, p. 70).

Playcentre Education is a subcommittee of the New Zealand Playcentre Federation and is a registered training provider. Playcentre Education provides courses leading to its Diploma in Early Childhood and Adult Education, which is accredited by NZQA at Level 6. Because of the large voluntary component in Playcentre, participation in the Playcentre Diploma is free of charge to Playcentre members, and constitutes much of the formal adult education provided to parents. The Playcentre Diploma is made up of six 'courses', which increase in depth and complexity from Course 1, an introduction to Playcentre. During 2007 Playcentre members completed 3887 courses towards the Playcentre Diploma. That means that approximately 35% of Playcentre members completed a course during the year. Playcentres, associations and the Federation also provide other education events, such as leadership, parenting education, tutor training and professional development, which parents can access, which supplement the Diploma courses. During 2007 a total of 775 other education events were held, with 5396 participants (NZPF Annual Report, 2008). The

training courses that Playcentre provides equip members to provide the learning in Playcentre sessions, to operate effectively in groups and to manage their centres.

A specific function of Playcentre involvement in general, and involvement in the Playcentre Diploma in particular, is the way it offers parents a stepping stone to further education opportunities – a 'second chance' education, or an opportunity to change career. Some Playcentre members report that completion of Playcentre Education Diploma courses has given them confidence in themselves as learners and/or led to further study for qualifications outside Playcentre such as early childhood or school teaching (Powell, 2005). The *Quality in Parent-led* report (Mitchell et al., 2006) notes that 73% of respondents stated that they had learned new skills/knowledge from involvement in Playcentre, and 52% said they went on to use those skills or knowledge in other paid or voluntary work.

### **1.3.3 The early childhood sector in New Zealand**

Playcentre has traditionally provided a pathway to early childhood teaching and research in New Zealand. Many women and men began their interest in early education during their involvement with their own children at Playcentre, and through involvement in the Playcentre Diploma, and developed careers in other parts of the early childhood sector after their children began school. During the 2007 Early Childhood Convention, the largest early childhood conference in the Southern Hemisphere, a large number of participants indicated that they had been members of Playcentre at some point in their lives. "The 2007 Early Childhood Convention, held in Rotorua last week, demonstrated the huge impact Playcentre has had on early childhood education in New Zealand. When participants were asked to stand if they were past or present members of Playcentre, nearly half of the estimated 1600 participants rose to their feet. The sheer number of those standing spoke volumes for the multi levelled contribution by Playcentre and its people to the early childhood sector" (NZPF, 2 October 2007).

There is a risk, however, that this contribution is being undermined for the future. In the *Evaluation of Sustainability of ECE Services* report, King (2008) noted: "There was also concern that the training for parents offered by the Playcentre movement, which has traditionally provided a career path to ECE teaching, is now of diminished value to parents and the sector because even the most highly qualified and experienced Playcentre parents are not recognised as being qualified teachers, and Playcentre training cannot be credited towards the ECE Diploma" (p. 41).

Playcentre has been producing books and other written materials for its members since its earliest days. Originally these were produced by other publishing houses. From the early 1960s they were also being used by other adult education providers, and were written with wider education in mind (Stover, 1998). Playcentre Publications, the publishing arm of NZPF, was formed in 1972. Its aim is to provide publications and resources, primarily to enable Playcentre members to enhance their parenting skills and train towards gaining early childhood education qualifications, and secondly to provide resource material to the wider education sector. In recent years several books have become standard texts in teacher training institutions ([www.Playcentre.org.nz](http://www.Playcentre.org.nz)). As the only publication house in New Zealand dedicated to early childhood education (Stover, 1998), Playcentre Publications continues to serve the wider early childhood education sector.

### **1.3.4 Community benefits**

Playcentre contributes to benefits for the wider community through developing cohesion within communities, both in rural and urban areas. "Many Playcentres

provide a valuable community link and a sense of being part of the wider community for adults with young children whether they live in rural or urban settings. Often, the links within the local community and with other services that a Playcentre is able to maintain are vital to the continuation and growth of a Playcentre. In rural communities, the Playcentre may be the primary physical and social centre of the community” (Powell, 2005, p. 3).

Playcentre also contributes to the development of social capital in individual members, who then go on to enhanced contributions to the community, for example through involvement in school volunteering and boards of trustees. Social capital in relation to Playcentre involves the resources (social, cultural and economic) that participation in Playcentres provides along with the nature of the social networks that develop around Playcentres and their local communities. “Playcentre appears to contribute to the confidence and willingness of parents to try new tasks, take up new roles, and to participate in activities that they may not have undertaken prior to parenthood” (Powell, 2005, p. 3). Many community activities, such as children's sports, schools, church, marae and welfare groups would not be able to operate without volunteers willing to participate in their programmes. Playcentre participation increased members confidence and willingness to 'have a go' in other areas. Respondents said: “Playcentre gave me a second chance at education. I contribute to the community more”; “I thought I could never be 'The President' in any organisation, but now I know you can give anything a go as long as you do your best. Playcentre has given me more confidence” (Powell, 2005, p. 23).

## **2 Playcentre in 2008**

This section of the report builds on our research into the current state of Playcentre and issues raised at centre, association and federation levels. We have used a mix of data sources, including returns to the Ministry of Education, financial records and surveys conducted specifically for this report.

### **2.1 A profile of Playcentre**

Playcentres are organised into 33 local associations, which provide the adult education programmes and a range of other services to their member associations. The New Zealand Playcentre Federation provides the overall framework and supports for these associations.

There are currently approximately 500 Playcentres (including unlicensed centres). Over 48 percent of Playcentres are classified by the Ministry of Education as being in rural areas, with another 12 percent being in small towns.

Playcentres, and especially unlicensed Playcentres, are much more likely to rural than other ECE services. This has several impacts upon how Playcentre works within the early childhood system. Playcentres may be the only early childhood service available in some areas, and the only Playcentre in an area may be unlicensed. While the number of licensed Playcentres has reduced by over 20% since 2000, the number of children attending Playcentres was remaining approximately stable before the introduction of the Government's "20 free hours" policy for 3- and 4-year-olds. There has been a noticeable decline in attendance since that time (Morrison 2008).

Playcentres are not all the same. One key difference lies in supervision models. In most South Island centres, and some in the North Island, sessions are led by a paid "supervisor" who is an experienced parent who has completed at least a medium level Playcentre qualification (supervisor-led). Parents attend sessions up to once per week and may leave their child for other sessions (up to a maximum attendance of 5 times per week). Another common model has "teams" of parents responsible for particular sessions (team supervision). In this model team members hold a range of qualifications to meet the playcentre specific licensing agreement, with one delegated the responsibility of being the team leader. Generally parents in centres using this model will attend Playcentre once a week. The final (group supervision) model requires all parents to attend most of the sessions that their child attends. This model is most common in the Auckland Region. In all cases a parent or other caregiver attends with a child aged under 2 ½ years.

### **2.2 Costs**

#### **2.2.1 Methods**

We have accessed summarised accounts from Playcentres throughout the country. This information is collected by NZPF for internal purposes, and the categories used below for breaking down the accounts are those used by the account collection, rather than being specifically keyed to Ministry of Education categories. Accounts used for this report relate to the financial year ending in August 2007. These accounts have been compared to the Playcentre rolls reported for the RS61 returns in July 2007. We have assumed that the levels of enrolment are approximately consistent across the whole year, although we have had to exclude a few centres where the ratio of bulk funding income to enrolments in July are such as to render

this assumption untenable (for example, where the average bulk funding rate would appear to be under \$2.00 or over \$8.00 per child hour). After removing these outliers, we have statistics for 365 Playcentres. We have then calculated costs and income, both according to the total number of child hours, and per child hour for over and under 2-year-olds.

In calculating these costs, we have included levies to Playcentre Associations. Although these costs do not appear to have been included in analysis of the 2006 Ministry of Education Survey of Operational Costs which contributed to the development of bulk funding rates, it is necessary to include these costs in order to provide comparable costs for Playcentres to those used for other services. In the first instance, the regulations require parent-led services to be members of an approved association in order to be licensed. Association levies are therefore not an optional cost for Playcentres, as they are for education and care centres. More importantly, associations bear a large, and variable, part of the costs of operating and maintaining Playcentres. Depending upon the association, levies include vital costs such as building maintenance, administration functions, and even employment of centre supervisors. These costs need to be incurred in order for centres to run, and must form part of any realistic assessment of centre costs.

### 2.2.2 Costs

The average total cost of providing one child hour of Playcentre is \$5.97 (excluding transfers to reserves and training costs met by Tertiary Education Funding). Using the Ministry of Education's formula for calculating the costs of providing ECE to over twos for the purposes of calculating the 20 free hours subsidy:

$$\text{Average cost of provision (per over2 hour)} = \frac{\text{Total Cost}}{\text{over2 hours} + (\text{under2 cost weighting} * \text{under2 hours})}$$

Using the Ministry of Education's weighting factor for under 2-year-olds of 2, we were able to calculate an average cost of provision per over2 hour of \$4.76. In practice this figure is likely to be low as the weighting factor assumes provision for under 2-year-olds to be twice as expensive as that for over-twos. Our calculations indicate that the actual ratio of costs for under-twos and over twos for Playcentre is actually 1.2.

We cannot be assured of consistency in the allocation of costs to particular headings; however, the recorded costs per child hour were broken up as follows:

<b>Cost code</b>	<b>Amount per child hour</b>
Levies	\$1.88
Supervision and personnel costs	\$0.99
Training costs not included in Tertiary Education Funding	\$0.11
Consumables	\$0.24
Other equipment	\$0.41
Costs associated with fundraising	\$0.19
Housekeeping	\$0.17
Administration	\$0.29
Property	\$0.74
Utilities	\$0.46
Activities	\$0.09
GST	\$0.20
Other expenses	\$0.21
<b>Total</b>	<b>5.98</b>

The three largest items (levies, supervision and property) were also the most variable. Levies vary according to the services provided and overheads of the association to which a centre belongs as well as “equity” factors, whereby richer or larger centres provide some cross-subsidisation to poorer centres. Supervision costs vary according to the supervision model (supervisor-led, group or team supervision) applying to a particular centre or association. Property costs vary not only according to the different rental factors applying to different areas, but also to whether a centre has carried out major maintenance work, and whether this work is funded by the centre itself, the local association or the region (through the regional works schemes, which share major project costs across associations).

Very little of the variation in the costs of provision can be accounted for by different age mixes (proportions of under twos to over twos) and urban versus rural centres.

### 2.2.3 Income

Excluding transfers, the average income for Playcentres during the 2007 financial year was \$6.14 per child hour. This income was made up in the following way:

Cost code	Amount per child hour
Bulk funding	\$3.85
Equity funding	\$0.14
ATIS funding	\$0.14
Fees	\$0.36
Donations and grants	\$0.66
Equipment and maintenance reimbursements	\$0.04
Fundraising	\$0.56
GST income	\$0.21
Other income	\$0.18
<b>Total</b>	<b>6.14</b>

Counting all Government funding together (bulk funding, equity and ATIS funding), the Government met 65% of the total financial cost of Playcentre operations.

### 2.2.4 The 20 Free Hours Policy

Playcentre is currently excluded from the 20 free hours policy. The grounds for this exclusion have been stated as:

#### Why do Playcentres not qualify to offer this policy?

The government and many parents around the country value the quality service Playcentres provide for our children. The fact that parents have the option to learn alongside their children through Playcentre is important and many parents will continue to use Playcentres for this very reason.

This policy however is available for teacher-led services, which does not include Playcentres. Families who use teacher-led services face higher fees, mainly due to teacher registration requirements. (Maharey 2007)

This is not an adequate argument for exclusion from the policy. With respect to the costs argument, it could be argued that the Ministry is punishing Playcentres for their relative efficiency compared with other early childhood education services. If the argument is simply about being teacher led, then it is circular.

If we use the Ministry's assumptions that under-twos cost 2 times as much as over twos, the cost of offering 20 free hours to Playcentre would be \$4.76. The current normal rate of bulk funding in the Funding Handbook is \$3.47 per child hour for children over the age of 2, with a very few Playcentres receiving the Rate 2 amount of \$3.94. The gap between the normal bulk funding rate and the amount that would be required to provide free education for 3- and 4-year olds would therefore be \$1.29. In the week covered by RS 61 returns for 2007, 3 and 4 year olds attended Playcentre for a total of approximately 40,500 child hours. If we assume that this level of hours is approximately consistent across a 40 week school year, the

maximum additional cost to the government of providing 20 free hours ECE for children attending Playcentres would be \$2.1 million.

As stated above, the actual ratio of costs between Playcentre provision for under- and over-2-year-olds was 1.2. Using this ratio, the cost of providing one child hour of Playcentre to an over 2-year-old child is \$5.73. Using this ratio, the additional subsidy would be \$2.26 per hour or a maximum of \$3.6 million per year.

## **2.3 Volunteer time**

These financial costs are far from the only ones faced by Playcentres. Nearly all community early childhood services require some level of volunteer contribution from at least some parents. The contributions made by Playcentre families are, however, both qualitatively and quantitatively different from other services. While many services might expect parents to participate in fund-raising, the occasional working bee and, possibly, a management committee, Playcentre parents are involved in all aspects of centre, association and Federation operations. As part of this research we undertook surveys of centres, associations and Federation officers, to identify the amount of voluntary work that is currently being undertaken.

### **2.3.1 Centres**

We surveyed 102 centres, with 36 responding (36%). The centres were asked to break down all of the work undertaken to keep the centre operating during the 3 months from 1 March to 31 May, with separate sections for paid and unpaid work. The centres responding to the survey slightly over-represented rural centres (53 percent of the sampled centres compared with 48% of all Playcentres) but included centres from 22 out of the 33 Associations, giving a good coverage across the country. There were no significant differences in the size of the centres compared with the averages across all Playcentres (the average for the sample was just under 30 children attending, while that for all Playcentres was just over 31).

The categories of task surveyed, and the average amounts of times that centres/families spent on them during the survey period were as follows:<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers subject to rounding, totals may not be exactly equal to the sum of figures above.

<b>Task</b>	<b>Average volunteer time per centre across survey period</b>	<b>Average Paid time per centre across survey period</b>
Running Sessions	595	126
Centre meetings	79	3
Cleaning	112	6
Administration	70	6
Fundraising	35	0
Working bees	32	0
<b>All Activities</b>	<b>923</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>All Activities other than running sessions</b>	<b>328</b>	<b>15</b>

These times specifically exclude time spent on association meetings and duties, which are detailed below.

There is considerable variation in volunteer hours at different centres, but these mainly revolve around the amount of time spent on running sessions. While the average time per family spent on running sessions was around 3.5 hours a week, the average family at one centre spent nearly 10 hours a week on session. These differences arise from the different supervision models applied in different areas. Most South Island centres, and some in the North Island, have a supervisor-led model, where sessions are managed by an experienced and trained parent, who is usually paid. Depending on the Centre, parents may attend sessions less frequently than once a week. On the other hand some centres, particularly in Auckland apply a model where parents must attend most sessions that their children attend.

For the most part, Playcentre parents are happy to attend the number of sessions that their Playcentre considers appropriate. However several returns noted that the amount of time spent on other activities (particularly administration and cleaning) were causing some parents to leave.

Multiplying out the figures above to get an annual number of hours, we can see that the average centre required approximately 3700 hours of voluntary labour *at a centre level* including 1300 hours of work outside of session time. If we take a low estimate of the value of that labour as \$15 per hour, this means that the administrative, cleaning and similar functions carried out by volunteers are worth \$19,500 per year. This contrasts with the approximately \$2500 per year extra (after 3 years) which the Government budgeted in 2006 to support Playcentres in carrying out administrative functions.

### **2.3.2 Associations**

Playcentres cannot operate without the enormous contribution made by the Playcentre associations, much of it undertaken by volunteers. Excluding the provision of training courses, funded through ACE and Student Achievement Component Funding, associations provide:

- Direct support to centres to deal with issues arising at various levels;
- Property support, including ownership of some centres' lands and buildings, maintenance, building projects and licensing support;
- Policies and procedures to enable centres to run more effectively and safely;
- Administrative support;

- Employment services;
- Specialist support in areas such as promotions, biculturalism and special needs education among other services.

On average each of the 16 associations that responded to our survey required 879 volunteer and 911 paid hours to operate during the three month period surveyed. Annualising this figure gives a total of 3516 volunteer and 3644 paid hours per association. The aspects of operation which took the most input were association and federation meetings; administration; and direct support of centres. Looking in terms of the number of hours per centre, gives an approximation of the amount of contributions required per centre to enable their associations to operate effectively.

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Average volunteer hours per centre</b>	<b>Average paid hours per centre</b>
Attending association and federation meetings	126	10
Training or workshops other than those part of the Playcentre Diploma	12	4
Administration	46	104
Direct support of centres	23	58
Fundraising	7	2
Building and property	8	11
Other	21	58
<b>Total</b>	<b>243</b>	<b>247</b>

Again using the very conservative figure of \$15 per hour, this would amount to a further \$3645 per centre of volunteer time required to operate the Association services.

### **2.3.3 Federation**

In addition to the centre and association officers, the New Zealand Playcentre Federation provides services to the movement as a whole. Most Federation positions are voluntary, but the federation has a secretary and bookkeeper paid for out of levies, and education staff paid for out of Tertiary Education Funding. We also surveyed the Federation Officers on how much support is required at a national level. Thirteen out of 24 officers reported on how much time they spent on Federation level tasks (many Federation Officers are also involved at centre and association levels). On average, each of these spent 296 hours of volunteer time on their positions during the three month period covered by the survey, or equivalent to nearly 1200 hours per officer each per year, or a total of over 28,000 volunteer hours per year.

Some Federation Officers suggested that it would be better to have more paid positions (for example a paid chief executive), if funding could be made available. This would allow the volunteers to spend less time on administration and more on direct support of centres and associations, and improve continuity in some areas. However the largest use of volunteer time was Federation meetings, and this is likely to continue even if more paid positions are created.

## **2.4 Issues affecting membership**

### **2.4.1 Geographical dispersion**

Playcentres have a quite different geographic profile from other services providing early childhood education in New Zealand. Most education and care, kindergarten and home based care services are located in cities and major towns. Playcentres, by contrast are more commonly found in small towns and rural areas, which are often unserved or underserved by other types of services. Our discussions with representatives from different parts of the country indicate that the rural centres can have particularly high levels of fluctuations in memberships, due to events such as the movements of sharemilkers with young families. Policy makers need to be aware that the impacts of such fluctuations on short term viability of centres need not mean that centres will be unsustainable in the longer term, assuming association support and a policy framework that is sympathetic to such issues. One centre that the authors are aware of has fluctuated to as low as one family with one child of Playcentre age before recovering to 15 families.

### **2.4.2 Increasing labour force participation**

As an organisation that relies on the voluntary contributions of parents, the increasing number of families where both parents in two parent families or the sole parent in solo parent families are participating in the paid workforce can have impacts on Playcentre memberships.

Despite this, there continues to be a strong demand for Playcentre services. Indeed increasing participation in the paid workforce can increase the need for the types of networking and modelling of parenting behaviours that Playcentre provides at the same time as making it more difficult for families to participate in the service.

### **2.4.3 Discourses about “work”**

One theme that came through in comments on the survey from both centres and associations, and has also been noted by early childhood researchers (Farquhar 2008, Kahu 2006, Woodhams 2008) is that Government statements (whether intentionally or not) have positioned parenting as being neither educational for their children nor contributing to society. Parents are finding that they have to "justify" their decision to contribute to their children's education.

While the government has shown commitment to education for young children through its strategic plan for early childhood (Ministry of Education, 2002), statements that the government has made have given the impression that 'education' is something which begins once a child starts at an early childhood service, and only occurs through involvement in that service. For example, a widely circulated pamphlet states that: "from 1 July 2007 it will be easier than ever to start your child's learning early because up to 20 hours of ... ECE will be free for three and four year olds" (Ministry of Education, n.d.). Through further statements, the government then states that children will have 'more' education if they attend 'more' hours in an institution (Woodhams, 2008). This claim is refuted by current research (Farquhar, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2008).

Kahu (2006) examined the government's statements on women's role in society in the *Action Plan for New Zealand Women* (Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2004), and new mothers' own impressions about their role. While the *Action Plan* noted that women are twice as likely as men to have caring roles for someone in their household, Kahu (2006) noted that women are primarily constructed within the Plan,

and therefore government policy, as 'workers' with the responsibility of providing for their families and thus being a good citizen by 'contributing to society'. Care for 'dependants', including raising and educating children, is described as a 'burden', constructed as 'outside society', and certainly of a lower priority to workforce participation. The mothers who Kahu interviewed, by contrast, believed that parenting was essential work and their most important priority, and workforce participation was something they may be economically forced to return to sooner than they would wish. The statements of government work to 'normalise' by sheer force of repetition the idea that parenting is non-educational and unimportant, without allowing these ideas to be publicly scrutinised.

#### **2.4.4 But there is still a large demand for a family-centred early childhood experience**

Having said this, there are still many parents (both mothers and fathers) who want to be involved in their children's education and to develop their own parenting skills. Playcentre is one of the few outlets for these parents, and stands alone in offering this type of licensed service to parents who do not see Kōhanga Reo as a suitable option for their circumstances. Some areas have long waiting lists for their Playcentres and could easily fill more centres if building and licensing them was practicable under existing policy settings.

### **3 Supporting Playcentres**

This section examines how the New Zealand Playcentre Federation and, most particularly, associations support centres, what further support might be appropriate and what barriers were identified to providing greater support. For this section we asked centres and associations to focus on specific supports rather than a simple request for more money.

#### **3.1 Current support mechanisms**

There are several aspects of centre operations which may require outside support. These can generally be divided into three main headings: programme support; administrative and practical support; and what we call structural support.

##### **3.1.1 Programme support**

Programme support refers to activities specifically aimed at improving the educational programmes for children and their families. This could involve a range of activities including:

- Observing programmes in action, and making suggestions on how to improve them;
- Role modelling high quality interactions with children;
- Role modelling specific activities (for example the Māori support rōpu in one association offers the opportunity for centres to have support for one session a week for a term to model waiata, poi, te reo games etc);
- Focused professional development, for example, in improving the use of learning stories for assessment and planning.

This programme support role could be compared to the Senior Teacher role in a kindergarten association.

##### **3.1.2 Administrative and practical support**

Administration and practical functions include the many and various jobs that need to be done to ensure that operating, funding and licensing requirements are met, outside of the direct programme provision. This includes accounts and billing, ensuring that Ministry of Education forms are completed correctly and on time, checking equipment and environments and so on. It also includes more substantial work such as property maintenance and repairs of equipment. At present these occupy an average of 7 hours per week of volunteer time for each centre (not including association personnel time, which amounted to another hour per week of volunteer time and two hours per week of paid staff time). Nine of the centres responding to the questionnaire had paid administrators for at least a few hours a week, with the only centres where paid administration time outweighed volunteer hours being the two that paid for an administrator for at least 3 hours a week over the period.

We know that some administrative work is undertaken by associations, if only because the Association President is frequently the licensee for all centres within an association. However, centres spent significant time on administrative activities, with over 90% of that time coming from volunteers (compared to associations, who had

paid staff to assist with administration, meaning that less than a third of the time taken on administrative functions at an association level being undertaken by volunteers).

### **3.1.3 Structural support**

The final type of support is what we have called structural support. One of the strengths of Playcentre is that it develops social capital for its parent members, which they take out into the community when they leave. While this is valuable, some form of support is required to ensure that an ever changing membership does not deprive centres of the institutional knowledge and experience they need to operate effectively. This is often a key role of the centre support worker/liaison officer positions, whether voluntary or paid. For example these people know about ways of dealing with complex issues, can make suggestions about policies, or suggest sources of support for families with special needs.

While different associations had different approaches to supporting their centres, there were some common features. Nearly all associations had a team of centre support workers, liaison officers or similar. However the duties and status differed. In some associations, the centre support workers were nearly full time employees of the Association, involved in education, liaison and administrative functions. Such Associations expected their centre support workers to attend several sessions and centre meetings a term. In the case of one association such near full-time workers had responsibility for 6 or 7 centres each, including the provision and marking of Course 2, 3 and 4 certificates. At the other end of the spectrum, some associations saw centre support/liaison as a much more limited role to be carried out by volunteers with responsibility for no more than 2 or 3 centres, and one or two visits a term, possibly including meetings rather than sessions or vice-versa.

While centre support workers were able to provide some support on administrative matters, this tended to be more in the nature of making sure that centres knew about their responsibilities, reminding them of up-coming deadlines (for example for the submission of statistical returns to the Ministry of Education) and talking about how to complete forms than actually undertaking the functions themselves.

Most associations also provided property support. Some associations have employed property managers to take responsibility for property maintenance operations and to support centres with building projects. On the other hand, other associations left primary responsibility for maintenance with individual centres. This is one of the reasons for the variation in expenditures and association levies.

## **3.2 Barriers to supporting centres**

We also asked associations what barriers existed to make it difficult for them to provide the types and levels of support they would like to their centres. While the answers to this question varied, there were several common themes:

- Supporting centres can be expensive. Using the model of one person working 30 hours per week servicing 6 centres, a “full service” approach to centre support would cost between \$4000 and \$7000 per centre for salaries alone.<sup>2</sup> Other costs of a “full service” model would include travel (a major element for

<sup>2</sup> This is a very conservative estimate: A worker covering 6 centres at \$4000 per centre would receive only \$24,000 a year

associations with large numbers of rural centres, such as Otago and Buller-Westland) and office costs. Several associations said that providing the type of support they would like was too expensive to be viable on current funding.

- There is a limited pool of people with the range of skills required to provide effective support for centres. Associations using a volunteer model or which employed support workers for limited hours could find that turnover of supporters made it difficult to provide continuity, knowledge and appropriate skills, while smaller associations may find it difficult to provide continuity with full time support workers if they have insufficient funding to employ multiple workers. Smaller families and pressure for parents to return to the paid workforce only exacerbate these shortages.
- Travel and distance can be a major issue for some associations. Even forgetting the costs of transporting supporters to their centres, attending a meeting at a remote centre can involve returning home late.
- Some associations would like to provide their centres with office space and computer technology to support administrative functions, but this is again costly, and some centres do not have spaces easily adaptable into office space. Furthermore, computer equipment is most useful if you have members with a high level of IT skills, which will not always be the case.
- Volunteers are already over-committed. Trying to get them to increase the amount of support they provide is difficult.

In communications with association liaison convenors, it appears that there has been a movement from volunteer towards paid centre supporters, in an attempt to address some of these issues, but placing pressures on association budgets.

There have been some examples where centre supporters have made a big difference to centres. One example we were told about was a centre that had been on the verge of closing being given extensive support by an association. They employed a supporter who attended at least one session a week for a term, modelling educational interactions, encouraging members to undertake training and helping the centre committee with administrative functions. After two terms, the centre had doubled its membership, more than doubled the number of members under training and required much reduced support, leading to a situation where they were able to sustain sessions from their own membership.<sup>3</sup>

### **3.4 Issues raised by centres and associations**

We asked all respondents to comment on what the government could do to better support Playcentre, apart from simply increasing funding. The most common responses included the following:

- Inclusion of Playcentre in the 20 Free Hours scheme. Many respondents, particularly centres, argued that exclusion from the 20 free hours policy has had negative effects on Playcentre. Two major issues were commented upon. The first of these was that enquiring parents asked about whether their child would be eligible for 20 free hours at the Playcentre when they reached three, and did not continue with enrolment if the answer was no. The second was concern that the policy gives the impression that only teacher led services with children attending for a full 20 hours provide high quality early childhood education.

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<sup>3</sup> This is a different centre from the one described as recovering from a single family in section 2.3.1.

- Related to this, both centres and associations argued that the Government should be more forthcoming on the quality of Playcentre education. Respondents argued that outcomes for children from Playcentre are at least as good as those for other services, but that this is not reflected in the Government's publications, which universally emphasise the importance of "trained teachers". This finding was reflected in the Sustainability of EC Services report for the Ministry of Education.  
Playcentre stakeholders perceive that the new funding incentives for teacher-led services to employ registered and qualified teachers devalue other quality features such as those inherent in parent-led ECE. Stakeholders framed this less as a funding issue than as a lack of recognition of these quality features and of the value of parent-led options for both parents and children. Although findings from the Ministry-led research on quality in parent-led services (Mitchell, Royal Tangaere, Mara and Wylie, 2006b) enhanced this recognition, there was a general perception that the Strategic Plan marginalises the Playcentre model by focusing on teacher-led services.p.41.
- Related to both of these arguments was the further comment that the government should do more to recognise the positive role that full time parents make to society and to their children. This point is further articulated in our literature review section above. It should be noted that the impression that Playcentre parents gave of feeling that parenting is under-valued is one that several other researchers have found. For example, Kahu (2006) found that the participants in her focus groups of parents found that Government policies and social attitudes made full-time parenting a marginalised choice.
- Centres, in particular, were concerned about the levels of regulation and administrative requirements. One centre responded to the question about what the Government could do as follows:  
"Please reduce the paperwork"!! As a centre we have definitely lost some potential members due to the amount of paperwork involved ... there must be a level of reporting which is applicable to us/Playcentre, which is less in depth and time consuming. We do understand the requirements of accountability as we receive funding, etc, etc, but the number of hours spent in "form filling" to achieve this makes many of us question ... our involvement.
- Changes to the regulations were a particular concern for some centres, who were uncertain about the effects of these on their ability to keep operating or on the costs of future building works. Rural centres were particularly likely to comment on these issues, but the concerns also applied to urban centres.  
As we are only a small centre in an area which is now hugely affected by dairy farming (transient populations), we are finding it very difficult to keep up with the Ministry's standards. E.g., property issues, building regulations, etc... We just seem to have things right, and then they change something for a health and safety reason – which we have never had an issue with and it costs us a huge amount of money and time to change.

### **3.5 Supporting associations**

We also asked Federation Officers how they support Associations (and to a lesser extent centres). None of the Property and Equipment team responded to the questionnaire, so we cannot talk about their contributions. The Federation officers noted several activities which they undertake to support associations, including:

- Responding to enquiries about their particular areas;
- Coordinating national activities such as promotions or publications, which are more efficiently carried out by a larger organisation such as the Federation rather than individual associations;
- Providing structures, frameworks and quality control for matters such as education programmes;
- Regular contact by phone or e-mail;

- Organising meetings of Association officers to network about particular areas (for example, property, promotions or liaison/centre support).

Suggestions of how the Federation could improve support included:

- Turning some tasks over to paid staff, with a management structure to support this freeing Standing Committee to focus on strategic;
- More direct, face-to-face contacts with association personnel (these two were the most common suggestions);
- Setting up more systems for administrative functions to streamline these;
- Provide a clear, brief statement of strategy and direction;
- Increase promotional and lobbying efforts.

Federation officers suggested a similar range of possible government actions to those brought forward by associations and centres:

- Valuing the work of parenting,
- recognising the quality of Playcentre, and that it does not fit neatly into their vision of ECE, and should not be made to do so,
- funding support mechanisms;
- reducing compliance costs and regulatory hurdles; and
- recognising that Playcentre is about families, not just children.

### **3.6 Government created handicaps**

This section outlines some of the issues raised by centres that specifically relate to Government activities. Calling them “Government created handicaps” should not be read to imply that the Government is deliberately targeting Playcentre. Rather it is identifying the ways in which Government policies and requirements impact on Playcentre.

#### **3.6.1 Discourses on “Quality”**

The Government has, whether intentionally or not, positioned teacher training and qualifications as virtually the only significant dimension of quality. This was highlighted, for example, when a Minister said in her opening speech at a conference attended by large numbers of Playcentre representatives “we want all centres to be teacher led centres” (Chadwick 2007), but can also be seen in other Ministry documents as well as the fact that increasing the number of registered teachers has had absolute priority in implementation of the early childhood strategic plan. This focus has had an unintended impact on Playcentres, who insist that quality is a characteristic of *outcomes* for children and parents rather than *inputs*.

#### **3.6.2 Increasing administration burdens**

The administrative burden created by Ministry regulations and paperwork was one of the key areas that centres wanted more support for (and less compliance costs). There was a view from centres that the level of compliance administration was constantly increasing, with the recent proposal that all adults having “unsupervised” access to children would need police vetting being regarded as a further example. Depending on the interpretation of the clause, it could mean every Playcentre parent having to be vetted *before* they could begin attending, leading to a need for both the centres and the Police to handle a large number of vetting applications (over 11,000 for Playcentre nationally) in a short time span.

### **3.6.3 Exclusion from initiatives**

Exclusion from the 20 free hours policy has been of particular concerns to the Playcentres in the sample. These concerns arose from both the fact that parents who contacted them would begin by asking whether Playcentre offered 20 free hours, and turn away when the negative answer was given, and because the publicity accompanying the policy has explicitly equated high quality education with teacher led services.

There is also a view among some Playcentre associations and NZPF officers that Playcentre is treated inequitably when it comes to programmes such as the discretionary grants scheme.

## **4 Recommended Government and Federation Supports**

### ***4.1 Financial costs now borne by Playcentres***

The current settings have the Government funding a much lower proportion of the real costs of operating Playcentre than they have claimed. Approximately 35% of Playcentre costs have to be raised by centres themselves or funded by drawing down on reserves. This systematic understating of funding has arisen from the Ministry of Education's failure to recognise the centrality of Playcentre Association activities to the operating of Playcentres. Even assuming that there is no movement to professionalising administrative functions or inclusion in the 20 free hours scheme, there should be some adjustment in the funding rate to recognise the inappropriate costing basis used by the Ministry. Increasing the proportion of Playcentre costs met by the Ministry to 75% would require an increase to the bulk funding rate of 16%, assuming no changes to Playcentre costs.

### ***4.2 Supporting Centres and prioritising volunteer time***

We detected no particular unhappiness with the amount of time that Playcentre members spend actually on session with their children. There was, however, considerable dissatisfaction with the amount of volunteer time dedicated to administrative and other additional activities. On average, each of the Playcentres in our survey spent 328 hours on these non-core activities over the quarter year period. Of these hours, probably 55 hours were activities that would have been carried out by volunteers in a community education and care centre (fund-raising and working bees) and probably 3 quarters of the centre meeting hours form part of the Playcentre model. This leaves 214 hours per quarter, or 856 volunteer hours per year per Playcentre spent on administration, cleaning and other non-core activities, that could easily be carried out by paid staff (probably Association staff for administration, with cleaning being contracted out at either a centre or association level).

We suggest that providing paid support for the major functions outlined in the centre support section, would greatly reduce the stress for centres.

The cheapest support would be to assist centres to pay cleaners. Currently the centres included in this survey averaged about 3 hours per session of voluntary time spent on cleaning type activities. Paid cleaners would probably be more efficient, and we would suggest that funding cleaners for 1½ hours per session would be of great assistance in this area. For a Playcentre offering the average 3.3 sessions per week, and assuming a cost of \$14 per hour, the average cost per Playcentre would be \$2,772. Assuming that the funding rate is increased as outlined above incorporating the costs of running associations, it should be possible for centres to fund this out of operational funding.

Programme support, administration and structural support are probably best handled at an association level, allowing for the aggregation of administration work to efficient levels. Currently centres averaged about 7 hours per week of voluntary time on administrative functions. To employ an administrator for 5 hours a week per centre (allowing for some efficiency gains) at \$16 per hour would cost an average of \$4160 per centre.

Finally we recommend that the programme and structural support elements be combined, given that the experience and skills required for such work are likely to be interlinked, that associations be funded to provide 5 hours per week of centre supporter time for each centre within the association. These positions have a higher level of required skill and experience, and we expect that approximately \$20 per hour would be an appropriate figure, giving an average of \$5200 per centre.

### **4.3 *Twenty free hours***

We recommend that Playcentres be eligible for the 20 free hours policy for 3- and 4-year-olds. However, there is a need to define what “free” means in the context of Playcentre. Obviously all of the financial costs currently met by members would have to be covered. To be truly “free”, though, would mean removing from members the activities which they see as an imposition on their time. As noted above, Playcentre members were generally happy to spend the amount of time on session that their associations or centres felt proper but were less happy with the time spent on administration, cleaning and maintenance tasks. For Playcentre to be “free”, then, it would be appropriate to cover the costs of these administrative and cleaning tasks.

There are several possibilities for calculating the amount of subsidy which Playcentres should receive.

- Given that Playcentre provides child outcomes at least as good as those for children attending other types of services, an outcomes driven model would suggest providing centres with funding at the same level as other sessional centres eligible for twenty free hours funding (currently between \$5.09 and \$6.53 per hour depending on the staffing – yielding a total additional cost of between \$1.62 and \$3.06 per child hour for children aged 3 and 4).
- Assuming that the additional costs of the supports we recommend above are funded separately, and using the Ministry of Education’s assumptions about the relative costs of providing for under and over 2-year-olds, the calculated cost per hour of free ECE for \$4.76, with the difference between the current rate and the subsidised rate being \$1.29 per child hour.
- We have calculated that this rate would result in under two-year-olds cross-subsidising older children. Our calculation is that there is only a small difference between the cost of providing for younger children and older children in Playcentre (because under twos are always accompanied by a parent or caregiver), with an hour of under 2 provision costing 1.2 times the cost of over two provision. Using this assumption the cost per child hour for 3- and 4-year-olds would be \$5.73, and the additional subsidy \$2.26.
- If the additional costs of providing support as discussed above are rolled into bulk funding rates, appropriate adjustments would need to be made, but the amount of additional subsidy for 20 free hours would remain the same.

## 5 Recommendations

We recommend that:

- a. The Ministry of Education change its funding model for Playcentre to recognise the vital role that Associations play in the operation of Playcentres;
- b. Playcentre be included in the 20 free hours policy for 3- and 4-year-olds;
- c. The Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Playcentre Federation negotiate funding for administration and centre support workers at a level of 5 hours per week per centre for each of these functions, including non-licensed Playcentres;
- d. Playcentres and Playcentre Associations consider the use of commercial cleaners to reduce the stress for centre members involved in carrying out cleaning and maintenance functions; and
- e. The New Zealand Playcentre Federation and the Ministry of Education consider whether bulk funding rates for Playcentres should be altered to recognise that over-tuos make up a higher proportion of costs than would be found in teacher led services.

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