

We Are Playcentre

REAL STORIES FROM PLAYCENTRE PARENTS

Created by Mornington Playcentre ✨ 2020



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This is my place.
These are my people.



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We don't have family
here and so playcentre
filled that void for us.



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We really are
like a village.



"I first came to Mornington Playcentre with my eldest boy 8 years ago. I actually didn't know much about playcentre back then. My husband used to go as a child and encouraged me to check it out. It's actually kind of cool that we now go to the playcentre that my husband went to as a child with his mum. I guess you could say playcentre is in our blood.

When I started attending sessions, I was a first-time mum, learning as I go. I really thought I had this crazy kid who wouldn't stop throwing things. But at playcentre I started to learn about child development from the facilitators, other parents and through the training playcentre provides. I learned how to guide my child positively and that his behaviour was totally normal for his age.

As we welcomed more children into our family, they were welcomed into our playcentre family too. Each of my children has loved different aspects of playcentre. My eldest boy spent a lot of time in the sandpit and my eldest girl set up shop in the craft corner. My youngest boy still attends and it's rare to find him without a car in his hand. My youngest girl is just a toddler and is still learning what she loves most. She's definitely drawn to water play. They all love different specific areas of play and

I know that they also love being there with me. That's a pretty special part of being a member of playcentre. I'm right there with them to share in their fun and delight.

I also get a lot from being able to enjoy adult conversation with other parents. It's somewhere

I can debrief about the kids and life. After 8 years it's become my second home and I've made friends that I know will be lifelong. It does require volunteer hours to be a part of the co-operative but I think we do a pretty good job at sharing the load equally. We like to be aware of the needs of each family so that they can be supported both at home and in their playcentre role.

The best way to know if playcentre is for you is to come along and hang out for a session. You get three free sessions that are offered for that exact reason. We want families to be comfortable at our centre and they know

what's best for them and their families. So, it's worth just coming to have a look around. We love welcoming new parents with a cuppa and the kids usually don't want to leave."

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*Rowan plays with his mum Andrina at
playcentre while sister Zoe enjoys mat time.*



"As soon as I heard about playcentre I yearned to be a playcentre mum. When I lived in Auckland my two eldest girls went to a very good daycare while my husband and I worked to pay the bills. I appreciated all the pictures and videos the daycare sent me but I desperately wanted to be there with them among the sand, glitter and paint.

Moving to Dunedin allowed me that chance. I had actually contacted my local playcentre (Mornington) before we even got here to tell them I was coming. My two eldest girls enjoyed coming

to playcentre immensely and my youngest and I still attend. They all loved different aspects. Charlotte loved theatrics and putting on plays. Michaela loved to construct forts and Maggie, well, I think she's still working out what she loves best. The way she zooms around centre, it looks like she loves it all.

Maggie draws with her mum, Bronwyn.



There are so many things I love about playcentre. It's a place where parents can find a bit of breathing space while also connecting deeply with our own children and each other's. The days when I'm sleep deprived and feeling short on patience are days that are best spent at my playcentre, where things feel less intense. I'm not sure why, perhaps it's because my child isn't solely focused on me and I have friends there that I can express my frustration to rather than the cold four walls of my home.

When I was new to this city, Mornington Playcentre became like a second home. I've developed some incredible friendships there that I'm sure will be lifelong.

I know that people sometimes say that being a part of a playcentre is too much work. We do have to take turns helping run the sessions and we do have to clean up after our kids have finished playing. We're provided with training that I find really interesting (especially positive guidance). I guess for me, doing my part to support the running of my playcentre is what deepens that incredible sense of belonging that I feel from being there. We're not just there to put out paints and sweep the floor. We are

a part of planning each session and setting up activities that our children have shown interest in.

That's the wonderful part of the playcentre philosophy. It recognises parents as the best first educators of their children. We know them best. So, we're able to come up with ideas, activities and ways of operating that serve our children. We're putting our hands in the clay and creating something. I guess it could seem like a lot of work but I think of it as being given a chance to be involved in my child's early education in a way that's not available anywhere else.

That's why I came and that's why I continue to come with Maggie. Playcentre allows me to be a part of her early learning journey. So, I'd say to anyone who is drawn to that idea that they come along and give a session a try.

Playcentres offer three free sessions so parents can see for themselves if it's a good fit for them and their child. I always love welcoming new faces, so if you see me, come and say "Hi" and I'll put the kettle on."

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“My first memory of playcentre was going along to a session with my next-door neighbour and her mum. I remember being struck by how friendly the adults were. I loved my neighbour’s mum. She was a definite playcentre mum as she had paints at her house. When I first attended playcentre as a parent, I noticed how settled the children were, how strong their friendships were and I could sense this community feeling. I realised it was a place specifically for families and I hadn’t experienced that anywhere else.

My eldest had been at a preschool before and had struggled to make friends but within a term at playcentre, she had a best buddy. Not only that, her friendships extended beyond the environment of playcentre. She was having playdates at their houses. She had a network of friends and so did I.

My middle child couldn’t settle into a preschool at all when I attempted to go back to work. She needed me to be there to settle properly. She needed the freedom to investigate what interested her and she didn’t like to be interrupted by routine or

scheduled activities. Playcentre allowed her to fully engage and explore through play and then it was home to bed. For my youngest, it turned out he needed both. A strong network of friends and the freedom to explore. Playcentre was an environment where all my children’s needs were met in their own unique ways.

For some, playcentre is seen as too much work. It requires some volunteer hours that’s for sure. But I don’t think it has to be too much work, not if everyone does what they can to help. I do feel that to truly be a part of a community, you have to be participating in that community. Playcentre allows you to choose an area over which you can have ownership and taking up that ownership builds friendships and bonds. Well, that’s how it was for me.

I have a degree in Early Childhood Education therefore I was exposed to many different kinds of early learning environments. When it came to working at playcentre, I found that I learned a lot from being on the job. It’s a little trial by fire but I learned fast. Also, playcentre’s training is really good. Even after 3

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years of higher education, my knowledge of Te Whariki was cemented by workshops provided by playcentre. I think it was because I was able to immediately start implementing what I was learning and see the outcomes of that. In general, I was drawn to work at playcentre because it grows families through support and community. It gives parents a voice and representation.

I felt encouraged and empowered as a playcentre parent. There were times I’d feel a bit negative about how my parenting was going and then another parent would point out something really positive my child had done and I’d feel my confidence rise. It’s a trying time when you have preschoolers in your life so those moments of positivity are important. They helped me shift my focus. I felt cared for

Heather reads a story at Playcentre mat time.

by my playcentre community. One time I had been feeling sick but soldiering on (as mums do) and I got to playcentre and just burst into tears. I found myself relieved of all my duties, my children taken care of, cups of tea in hand. It turned out I had mastitis and I had meals brought to my house for a full week. Even later on when I became an educator for the SPACE baby development programme being run out of a playcentre, I turned up to run the class with my own baby and found parents would swoop in to hold her while I conducted the class.

That’s what’s beautiful about playcentre. It’s a community that cares and that can be hard to find elsewhere.”



KIRSTEN ROONEY ✨ MUM OF THREE

"Before I had kids I used to go into playcentres for my work as a speech-language therapist. I got a feel for the environment playcentres offer and I noticed that the parents were involved in running the sessions. After I'd completed the SPACE programme for babies at Mornington Playcentre, I just enrolled to attend there. It was a logical next step. My eldest, Brendan, is an observer by nature. Playcentre worked well for him because it allows children to follow their interests. He was

able to just take everything in and decide at his own pace what he wanted to do. It was a relief to be able to go to playcentre with him because I knew he wasn't ready to be dropped off anywhere without me. You'd often find him in the cars and blocks corner and later he developed an interest in art. Christopher likes to be able to move around and do different things and you'll find my Natalie in a dress-up and probably in the family play corner. We don't have family here and so playcentre filled that void for us. It was somewhere we could all go together. Playcentre does require parents to contribute their time and energy into the sessions but I think we do a pretty good job of meeting parents where

they're at. Some can contribute 20% and others can do 100%. Then older children move on or a new baby is born and that parent who could only do 20% now has capacity for more and that parent who had lots of time suddenly doesn't have much. The biggest thing for me was having somewhere to go (especially during winter) when you need to get out of the house and socialise. You can be supported by other parents and your child or children have a great time."

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Kirsten plays with playdough and wooden sticks with her children Christopher and Natalie.

"My first visit to Mornington Playcentre was with my grandchild, Ben, who's now at school. These days I attend with his younger sister Olive and her cousin Charlie as a way of supporting my children who are juggling work and home.

My children went to kindergarten and I'm from a Primary School background so I found playcentre to be quite different at first but truly, it's a lovely place where parents or grandparents can be a part of their child's and grandchild's development.

I particularly like the fact that they can do messy play here which at home, depending on your floor coverings and your patience, you might not do otherwise.

I found Ben enjoyed doing adventurous things and Olive adores babies. If there aren't any at centre on the day she attends, she gravitates towards the dolls. She loves being very caring to the little babies and it's wonderful to see that sort of connection being fostered at playcentre due to the mixed-age sessions.

My grandchildren really look forward to coming. The fact that they have a parent or grandparent here or other adults that they know well gives them a good sense of security. I like it because I'm not trying to multi-task doing my housework and caring for Olive. I can just sit and enjoy

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her one on one as well as the other children. I just don't have the variety of equipment and experiences that she can access here. It's nice to see her enjoying a variety of things and interacting with other children.

Olive enjoys so many things from painting to stories in the library and it's great that they can borrow books to take home. All in all, it makes a day of looking after the grandchildren very easy. You and the children can be fully occupied without going on a stressful outing or buying toys to keep them entertained. I know that some people are put off by the membership requirements such as cleaning up after session but you know, many hands make light work.

I personally enjoy the social aspect of it. You get to see your grandchild developing and can go home feeling like you've had a constructive day. I'd say to parents and grandparents who are caregivers, go and give it a try. Also, try

different days. Some are quieter, some are busier and there's a different mix of people each day."

Judy enjoys the art corner with her grandchild and other playcentre children.



"On my first visit to Mornington Playcentre I arrived right when they were doing mihi mat time and I was totally caught off guard. All these parents were singing and dancing with their kids and I thought, "What on earth have I walked into?" There is nothing like playcentre in Canada which is where I'm from. I really had no idea what it was. A lady had been encouraging me to drop into Mornington Playcentre for a free visit and since it was right next door to my eldest daughter's school I thought, why not?"

After the initial shock of singing and dancing adults, I settled in pretty quickly. The community aspect became evident immediately. I had been waiting for my youngest to be born before I came for a visit. As I sat in a comfy feeding chair and my middle child played with the other kids, I realised that my pregnancy might have been a lot less tiring if I had come earlier.

When we first started coming to playcentre my middle child was 3 years old. She had always been incredibly shy and wouldn't make eye contact with people she

didn't know. It didn't take long after enrolling for a change to stir in her. She became social and confident. The fact that I was always close by allowed her to come out of her shell and feel secure in her environment. The fact that the same adults were consistently there each time helped too and she began developing relationships with them. So did I. I found community. I was able to rely on others and be relied upon. In time, I was able to walk away as my children played to get a cup of tea and know that the other parents on session were right there to help them if needed. We really are like a village. We become in tune with each other's children as well as our own.

I enjoy the child-led learning philosophy of playcentre. We play at their pace and follow their cues. Right now my youngest loves the library corner and so that's where we settle in on session. The children aren't required to stop what they're doing when a group activity is happening. So if he wants me to stay in the library and read his favourite fire truck book to him yet again, then that's



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what I'll do. I also like that he can do messy play at playcentre because that's something I'm unlikely to do at home. I might do some water play but there's no chance that slime will enter the realm of my home. He likes messy play more at playcentre anyway where he can enjoy it with other children.

When people who are thinking about enrolling at a playcentre ask me if it requires much effort from the parents I tell them that anything worthwhile requires effort. It'd be a lie to tell them it doesn't. Parents have to put some work in and in return you receive a community and a fantastic learning environment for your children. I tell them to give it a try and do all three of the free visits because you need to give yourself a chance to get used to the environment. It takes a little while to find your feet and feel comfortable. I didn't feel comfortable singing and dancing in front of other people at first but I gave it a chance and it was well worth it in the long run."



Zahra knitting and in the puzzle area with her son.



"I was a playcentre kid. I went to a playcentre in Palmerston and my mum loved it there so much that she did all the playcentre training. She went on to become a supervisor and worked there long after I'd gone to school. I don't have a lot of memories of my life before school but the ones I do have of playcentre are magical. We had a couple of old turn handle telephones at each end of the building that one of the parents connected together so we could ring each other and talk on the phone. It was so exciting because you couldn't touch the telephone at home but we could call each other all day on



Claire enjoys a tea party with her daughter and another playcentre child.

the playcentre telephones. I think that playcentre is the sort of place where a lot of 'no's' become a 'yes'. Yes, you can use a real hammer. Yes, you can make a big glorious mess. I think that learning about schemas really assists in that 'how can we make this happen' kind of thinking. When you learn about the different schemas children have, like a trajectory schema where they consistently want to throw things or see things move, we divert away from 'how do we get this child to stop throwing things' to what activity can we set up where they can throw until their heart's content?

Since starting at Mornington Playcentre (about 2 years ago now) I've really enjoyed learning about things like that. By working my way through the playcentre education and workshops, I've learned a lot about things like 'play as learning' and 'positive behaviour guidance'. It's really helped me to reframe my thinking about my girls' behaviour and it's changed the way I speak about it. I'm more inclined to talk about how my child is seeking connection instead of referring to 'clingyness' for example. Over the years I've learned to step back more. On session, I'll assist the children in resolving their conflicts rather than charging in to save the day. I noticed that my elder girl, Evelyn, had turned a corner in her play when instead of constantly needing me nearby, she started asking me to move away. Her comfort zone had widened. My younger girl, Caitlin, has always been confident at playcentre. I started bringing her along from 6 weeks old, so it's really a second home for her. She's always excited to go and will get grumpy at me if we get in the car and head to the shops instead of playcentre.

For me, I knew going in what playcentre represents in a parent's life. With my mum's lifelong passion for playcentre, I knew that joining one was joining a community. So I came in looking to connect and I've really enjoyed getting to know a diverse group of people. We have young mums and mums more my age, we have dads, grandmas and people from different cultures and backgrounds. We don't have all the same interests and viewpoints but I've found a connection and common ground with most of the parents there. We're far more alike than we are different, especially when it comes to sharing the ups and downs of the parenting journey. And as I built those connections with other parents, I also built them with their children. When I play with another child in front of Caitlin, I'm modelling what it looks like to build connections and friendships.

My friendships at playcentre are something I value a great deal. When I was new to Mornington Playcentre I had a newborn and a toddler, I had my hands full for sure. The parents there really wrapped around us. They'd occupy Evelyn and hold Caitlin so I could finally get to the toilet or enjoy a hot cup of coffee. Now that it's just me and Caitlin at centre and she's a confident toddler, I get the chance to hold little babies or make an exhausted mum a coffee. It's all swings and roundabouts. Sometimes you're the one who is at full capacity and later on it's someone else. So when it comes to looking at what sort of role you might take on at centre, that's the sort of thing we take into account. We have roles that are as low effort as opening the mail to more time intensive work like creating budgets (which happens to be my area). I really didn't mind taking on the Treasurer role even though it is one of the largest roles in terms of tasks and responsibility. I'm a maths teacher. Accounting and spreadsheets are no biggie for me. Numbers are my thing.

I know parents are stretched and it can seem like too much to put time and energy into helping run a co-operative like a playcentre, but for me personally, I wanted

to do it because my playcentre is my village. They're my family. I care about the people there and we all wouldn't have met if it were not for playcentre's existence. So I'm grateful for that and I want to do my part to ensure its continuation.

I really encourage anyone who has been thinking about playcentre to come along and give it a go. You get three free visits which help you work out pretty quickly if it's the sort of place for you. I do think it's worth trying different days. Some days are busier than others and you'll meet a different mix of people each day.

I feel the value I get out of my playcentre comes from, in my opinion, what we all put into it. We bring our hearts and our skills. If we all did the bare minimum, we'd create a sort of impoverished place that only just scrapes by. But because we all do what we can to help the centre run, we have created a thriving environment that's rich in community and connection. When one of us has a baby, meals appear at the doorstep. When someone is sick - they receive phone calls and texts. I value the people there as much as I value playcentre as an

early learning environment for my children. This is my place. These are my people."

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Written and photographed by Share Your Story



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