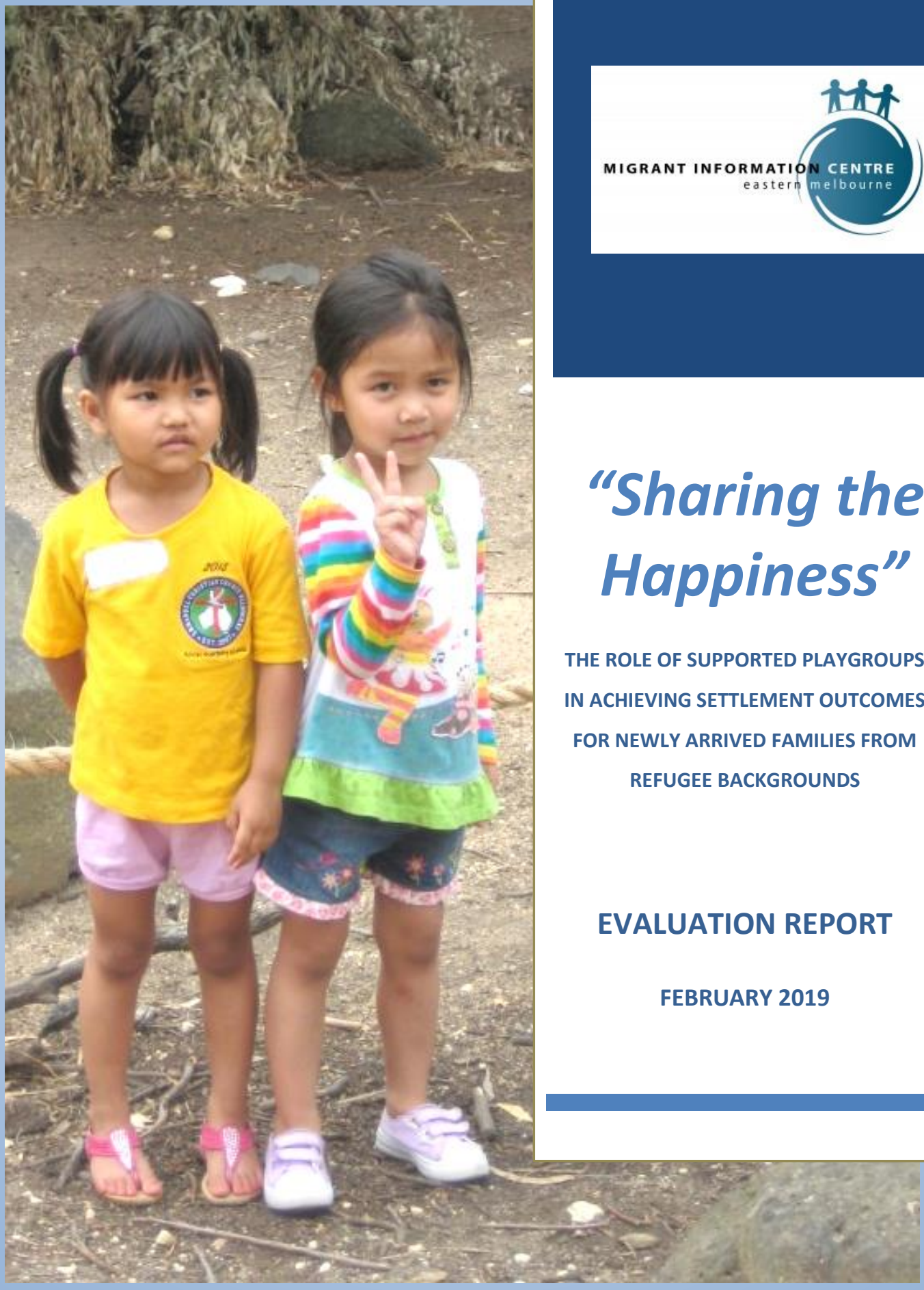

MIGRANT INFORMATION CENTRE
eastern melbourne

"Sharing the Happiness"

THE ROLE OF SUPPORTED PLAYGROUPS IN ACHIEVING SETTLEMENT OUTCOMES FOR NEWLY ARRIVED FAMILIES FROM REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

EVALUATION REPORT

FEBRUARY 2019

DISCLAIMER

Sharing the Happiness - The Role of Supported Playgroups in Achieving Settlement Outcomes for Newly Arrived Families from Refugee Backgrounds – An Evaluation Report is an evaluation of three supported playgroups facilitated by the Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne). The playgroups are funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services Settlement Grants Program. The supported playgroup in Mooroolbark is jointly funded by the Shire of Yarra Ranges under the Victorian Government Department of Education and Training Best Start Program.

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Acknowledgement is also extended to the Settlement Council of Australia in their development of the National Settlement Framework (2016) which enables MIC and other organisations who provide settlement services to measure settlement outcomes and contribute to the evidence-base of programs and services that meet the needs of newly arrived people from refugee and family stream migrant backgrounds. The Framework guides this research in documenting program outcomes.

Jessica Bishop
Manager
February 2019

KEY TERMS

DET: Department of Education and Training

DSS: Department of Social Services

EAL: English an Additional Language

MASC: Multicultural Affairs and Social Cohesion division

MIC: Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne)

NSF: National Settlement Framework

RAP: Refugee and Asylum Seeker Program

SCOA: Settlement Council of Australia

SGP: Settlement Grants Program

SETS: Settlement, Engagement and Transition Scheme

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1. Executive Summary

1.1. Background

This report provides an evaluation of the Migrant Information Centre's (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) supported playgroups programs for refugee families. MIC runs three supported playgroup programs in Ringwood, Croydon and Mooroolbark, the latter of which is run in conjunction with the Shire of Yarra Ranges. All playgroups are funded by the Department of Social Services as part of the MIC's settlement program, with the Mooroolbark playgroup a partnership with the Shire of Yarra Ranges. A MIC bilingual/bicultural worker co-facilitates this group with a Yarra Ranges supported playgroup facilitator. The playgroups are open to any families in the area who are from refugee backgrounds. However, the vast majority of participants are from Karen, Hakha Chin, Zomi and Falam Chin-speaking communities from Myanmar, with occasional attendees from smaller cultural communities who reside in the area.

1.2. Playgroup Model

The session structure of the playgroups are organised to include both structured and unstructured activities that focus on encouraging parents to play with their children and for children to have the opportunity to play with each other. Community and health service providers are invited to facilitate information sessions about issues relevant to the families. Playgroups also hold extracurricular activities for the participating families, such as swimming lessons at a local pool or excursions to places such as museums, local parks, local libraries or the beach during school holidays.

1.3. Evaluation Rationale

The aim of this evaluation was to analyse the effectiveness of playgroups in achieving specific National Settlement Framework outcomes for the children and parents. The report focuses on the settlement outcomes of health and wellbeing, civic participation and family and social support. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with two main groups of participants: current and past participants who had attended for over 12 months and had at least one child who had gone on from playgroup to kindergarten or primary school; and participants who are currently attending playgroup and have been attending for less than 12 months.

1.4. Findings

Supported playgroups provide a new social environment outside the home for parents, mostly mothers, and their children. Although the MIC Supported Playgroups are open to both mothers and fathers with pre-school aged children; overwhelmingly the majority of parents that attend with their children are mothers. Hence, the focus groups and one-on-one interviews for this research were with mothers and the findings are particularly relevant to them and their children.

Although most mothers attended playgroup to benefit their children, the playgroup was able to benefit them as well. A number of mothers noted that they felt "bored" at home as they had low English language proficiency and they lacked the confidence

to go out on their own. Although some mothers still felt that way at the time of the research, they found the playgroup an important activity to meet and socialise with other mothers outside of their community and learn information so that they could parent more effectively.

Other mothers who had been attending playgroup over the longer term noted that the playgroup helped them to learn English as well as learn about services so that they gained confidence in attending the service on their own rather than relying on their husbands. This indicates that supported playgroups can promote independence amongst women and enhance their settlement within an Australian cultural environment.

The number of children and ages of children in the playgroup impact on the success of the experience for many mothers. Through "word of mouth", promotion by MIC settlement workers to newly arrived families and the greater number of refugee families residing in the area, the Ringwood playgroup became too large. As a result, some mothers complained it was too difficult for children to play age appropriate games and it was too noisy and chaotic.

The MIC supported playgroups have been primarily funded through Department of Social Services Settlement Support Program [from January 2019 now known as the Settlement, Engagement and Transition Scheme (SETS)]. This program provides settlement support for refugees and family stream migrants for the first five years from their date of arrival in Australia.

In 2019, the MIC received funding from the Department of Premier and Cabinet, Multicultural Affairs and Social Cohesion Division to fund a second supported playgroup in Ringwood. This will decrease the current numbers of the Ringwood playgroup and enable mothers who have resided in Australia over five years a supported playgroup so that they can benefit over the longer term.

1.4.1 National Settlement Outcomes and Supported Playgroups

Supported playgroups achieve positive settlement outcomes particularly in relation to health and wellbeing, civic participation and family and social support for both children and parents. Supported playgroups provide a new social environment outside the home for parents, mostly mothers, and their children.

In particular:

- Improved health and wellbeing outcomes were achieved by increasing the knowledge of parents to support their children's and their own health, and by reducing the social isolation of parents by providing parents with the opportunity to socialise with each other while attending playgroup.

- Increased civic participation was achieved by exposing participants to broader cultural and community experiences, increasing parents' knowledge of and access to community services (including kindergarten), and developing children's independent capabilities such as social, behavioural and language

skills. This also assisted with a smoother transition to kindergarten for children.

- Improved family and social support was achieved by promoting healthy relationships between parents and children, encouraging positive parenting practices among parents, increasing opportunities for play and interaction between parents and children and providing parents with skills and knowledge to replicate play activities with their children outside of the playgroup.

1.4.2 Benefits for Children

A number of benefits have been highlighted for children:

- Developing language skills in English and in some cases Burmese as the playgroups consisted of children from mixed Chin and Karen backgrounds
- Learning new development skills and concepts such as colours
- Gaining greater social skills and behaviours such as learning to play and share with other children
- Improving their confidence and independence
- Preparing them for the transition to kindergarten and school through formal playgroup activities
- Experiencing extracurricular activities including excursions to parks, libraries, the museum and swimming lessons
- Strengthening relationships with parents through replicating activities at home

1.4.3 Benefits for Parents

The benefits for parents particularly mothers are:

- Providing an activity that enables mothers to go out of the home and socialise and make friends with other mothers
- Increasing their knowledge of early childhood development and age appropriate play which they can replicate at home
- Providing an environment where parents can play one-on-one with their child
- Increasing their knowledge of services, how they can assist them and how they can access them
- Increased English language skills for women who attended regularly over the longer term,
- Transfer the skills gained by parents and children to other settings (i.e. applying knowledge such as health information or attending Centrelink alone for parents and applying sharing and taking turns etc. for children)
- Building capacity and empowerment for women, particularly those who attended consistently and for a longer time

1.5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings from this report indicate that MIC's supported playgroups provide a unique setting for both parents and children achieving three main settlement outcomes as outlined in the National Settlement Framework, namely Health and Wellbeing, Civic Participation and Social and Family Relationships. Both newer and longer-term participants perceived similar outcomes from playgroups. Many of the findings confirm the playgroup outcomes suggested in existing literature; however, in this evaluation the findings suggested that these participants often conceptualised these outcomes within their experience of settlement, and therefore the achievement of settlement outcomes. This occurred primarily in two ways:

- Playgroups as enabling exposure to broader community and experiences
- Playgroup itself as exposure to broader community and an environment that cultivates social, behavioural and language skills

The playgroups' overall achievement of settlement outcomes became more evident in light of the fact that most participants did not leave their home often. Subsequently, these participants had very few other opportunities for similar experiences. This highlights the need for MIC to develop playgroups holistically and address the diverse range of settlement needs for participants.

Recommendations are:

- MIC to continue to facilitate supported playgroups to assist newly arrived parents of pre-school aged children from refugee backgrounds in achieving positive settlement outcomes particularly in relation to health and wellbeing, civic participation and family relationships.
- Identify additional funding sources and early childhood services that can facilitate supported playgroups for families from refugee backgrounds over the longer term following the initial five year settlement period.
- To further enhance settlement outcomes for parents, consult playgroup participants to identify whether they would like to incorporate a formal English as an Additional Language (EAL) component at the playgroup to increase their English language skills.

2. Background

The Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) has been providing settlement services to refugees and family stream migrants residing in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne since 1999. Our services and programs have been developed to meet the identified needs of individuals, families and community groups to enhance their settlement in Australia and assist them to participate and contribute to local life.

Over the past 8 years, the largest groups of refugees settling in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne were ethnic minority groups from Myanmar (formerly known as Burma). These communities included the Hakha Chin, Falam Chin, Mizo, Matu and Zomi from Chin State in North West Myanmar and the Karen community from south east Myanmar. These groups speak their own dialects and often are unable to communicate with each other; generally they have had limited schooling from their country of origin particularly women and have low English language proficiency.

In 2009/2010, consultations by the MIC with community leaders identified the need to provide activities that reduced the social isolation of women particularly those caring for young children at home. Culturally women were expected to stay home and care for young children and many women feared that their children would not be understood or cared for in child care centres. As a result, women with young children were not attending English classes and lacked confidence in attending appointments or shopping without their husbands accompanying them. At the same time, Maternal and Child Health nurses were asking the MIC for assistance to support and engage mums from Myanmar in early childhood services and settlement staff and real estate agents were reporting young children playing unsupervised in the driveways of residential unit complexes in the outer eastern suburbs.

Hence, the first multilingual and multicultural supported playgroup was established in 2009/2010 in the outer eastern suburb of Mooroolbark followed by two further groups in Ringwood in 2011/2012 and Croydon in 2012/2013. This report documents the evaluation of these supported playgroups to inform future service planning in supporting the settlement of mothers and pre-school aged children from refugee backgrounds.

3. Introduction

Playgroups provide children with “developmentally appropriate play opportunities” and their carers with opportunities to connect with other carers (Commerford & Hunter, 2017). There are two main types of playgroups run in Australia: community playgroups, which are generally open to anyone and involve parents in the running of the playgroups; and supported playgroups, which provide greater support to more vulnerable families who may have difficulty attending community playgroups (Commerford & Hunter, 2017). In supported playgroups, there is a more holistic focus on assisting the carer to support their child’s development, which involves measures

such as developing the carer's understanding of the principles of child development and providing referrals to external services when needed (Commerford & Hunter, 2017).

In 2009/2010 the MIC established its first supported playgroup in local government area of Yarra Ranges under the Settlement Grants Program funded by the then Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). In 2011/2012 the MIC established another supported playgroup in Ringwood and in 2012/2013 another group in Croydon in 2012/2013.

In 2011/2012 the MIC secured funding from the Shire of Yarra Ranges for a supported playgroup under the Supported Playgroup and Parent Group Initiative through The Department of Education and Training (DET) Best Start Program (see http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/Pages/beststart.aspx). By this time, the aims and objectives of the supported playgroup programs had been expanded to include excursions to visit local community services, such as the library, local parks and local swimming pools. In addition, service providers were invited to attend playgroup sessions to talk to families on topics that were relevant to raising children in an Australian context and regarding services available to families and how to access them. The playgroup facilitators identified these needs in consultation with the families attending the groups.

Currently, MIC continues to run these three playgroups, with the Mooroolbark playgroup running on a Tuesday morning, and the Ringwood and Croydon sessions running on a Friday morning and afternoon respectively.

3.1. Evaluation Rationale

The aim of the evaluation is to measure the effectiveness of the supported playgroup programs and contribute to the settlement outcomes stipulated by the National Settlement Framework (NSF) (Department of Social Services [DSS], 2016). This framework guides the work undertaken by settlement organisations such as the MIC (Settlement Council of Australia [SCOA], 2016).

The nine priority outcomes under the NSF are shown below (DSS, 2016).

Language Services	*Employment*	*Education and Training*
Housing	*Health and Wellbeing*	*Transport*
Civic Participation	*Family and Social Support*	*Justice*

After a preliminary review of the existing literature on supported playgroups and the standards for the NSF outcomes provided by the Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) (SCOA, 2016), these outcomes were deemed the most pertinent for the evaluation of the supported playgroups:

- Health and wellbeing
- Civic participation
- Family and social support

SCOA (2016) standards for the three outcomes relevant to this evaluation are found in Appendix A.

The evaluation questions subsequently assessed the achievements of these settlement outcomes:

- Have the supported playgroups contributed to the settlement outcomes of:
  - Health and Wellbeing
  - Civic participation
  - Family and social support
- How have supported playgroups achieved these outcomes?
- How could supported playgroups be improved to more effectively achieve these outcomes?

The primary intention of this report is to be used internally to guide MIC's future development of the playgroups program. However, given that there is minimal literature on the impact of supported playgroups on the settlement experiences of refugee families, this report also aims to establish an evidence base regarding the role of supported playgroups in the settlement period.

4. Literature Review

Refugee families with young children face a wide range of challenges that can hinder the success of their settlement in Australia (New, Guilfoyle, & Harman, 2015). This section of the report provides an overview of the settlement issues for these families, and benefits of playgroups in overcoming these issues as discussed in the existing literature.

4.1. Barriers to achievement of settlement outcomes

4.1.1. Health and Wellbeing

The loss of a family and community support networks, as well as a lack of confidence in participating in the broader Australian community, can result in severe feelings of social isolation among refugees living in Australia (McLaughlin, 2012). Along with the experience of traumatic events that many refugees in Australia have experienced, this social isolation has many implications for their health and wellbeing. Social isolation is also shown to contribute to a higher risk of serious mental health problems for refugees, particularly among women (Department of Social Services [DSS], 2017).

A lack of familiarity with the mechanisms and structure of the Australian health system, language barriers and resulting lack of confidence in accessing health services also leads to poorer health outcomes among both parents and children from refugee backgrounds (Riggs et al., 2012; Warr, Mann, & Forbes, 2013).

4.1.2. Civic Participation

This lack of confidence derived from social isolation also affects the way refugee families access other community services and their broader participation in the community. For example, while refugee parents view education as a strong priority for their children, many experience significant barriers when accessing Australia's unfamiliar early childhood education system (New et al., 2015). Parents may enter the education system with limited knowledge or expectations of schooling processes in Australia, as well as limited English language skills (New et al., 2015; Warr et al., 2013). Subsequently, this can result in discomfort when engaging with teachers or other parents (New et al., 2015). Reluctance to participate in the community breeds a number of other problems such as exacerbating feelings of social isolation (McLaughlin, 2012).

For children, the social isolation of their parents (particularly mothers) will mean that they have very few social experiences outside of the home prior to beginning school (Targowska, Teather, & Guilfoyle, 2015). This can hinder a child's ability to engage in school and the development of their learning abilities (Targowska et al., 2015).

4.1.3. Family and Social Support

Parents from refugee backgrounds are required to negotiate parenting in a new cultural and social context that may conflict with their understanding of parenting practices (McLaughlin, 2012). Subsequently, many refugees experience a lack of confidence in regard to their parenting abilities in Australia (McLaughlin, 2012). This can also contribute to a growing cultural gap between the parent and the child who is raised in Australia and will experience greater acculturation to Australian norms (South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre, 2011; McLaughlin 2012). The limited social networks of parents from refugee backgrounds in Australia can lead to further diminished feelings of support during the settlement period (McDonald Turner, & Gray, 2014; McLaughlin 2012).

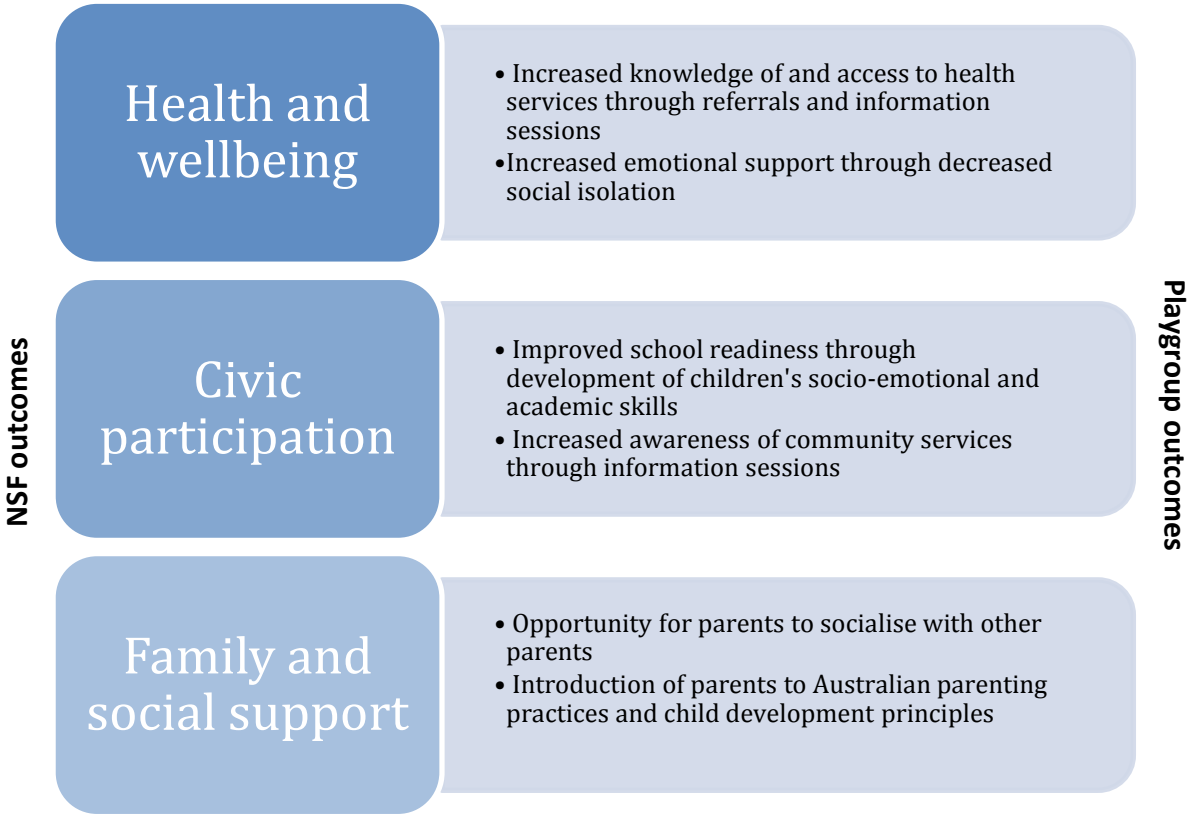
4.2. Benefits of playgroups

There are currently a limited amount of studies evaluating the effectiveness of supported playgroups, particularly for refugee families (Commerford & Robinson, 2016); nonetheless, the existing literature has suggested some particular benefits for these groups.

Playgroups have shown to be an important source of support for parents by providing them an opportunity to meet and socialise with other families. Parents are also introduced to Australian parenting practices and child development principles through engagement with open-ended play (Commerford & Hunter, 2017). In addition, facilitators are able to help parents access a broad range of family and health services through referrals and organising information sessions with relevant services (McDonald et al., 2014; Riggs et al., 2012; Warr et al., 2013). For children, the playgroup is an opportunity to socialise with other children through play activities. This experience of socialisation develops their "social, emotional and academic skills" and thus has a beneficial impact on the child's readiness for school and overall development (Commerford & Hunter, 2017; McDonald et al. 2014; Targowska et al., 2015).

This body of literature regarding the benefits for playgroups has helped inform MIC's practices when conducting playgroups, as many of the benefits mentioned above can be linked with the achievement of the NSF outcomes through mitigating the issues mentioned above. Figure 1 summarises these playgroup outcomes in relation to the relevant NSF outcomes. However, none of these studies conceptually situate playgroups within the framework of the settlement outcomes. This evaluation therefore will aim to address this gap through the clarification of the links between playgroup outcomes and the achievement of the NSF outcomes.

Figure 1: The connections between playgroup outcomes and NSF settlement standards



5. Research Design

This evaluation utilised the qualitative research methods of interviews and focus groups to explore the participants' experiences at MIC's supported playgroups and what they perceived as the main outcomes of their participation. This complemented the MIC's quantitative methods obtained through attendance lists and feedback surveys which measured the level of satisfaction of parents with the supported playgroups and whether the playgroups reduced their social isolation and supported their settlement. In contrast, this evaluation enabled the MIC to gain in-depth responses on participants' experience of playgroup participation.

The SCOA standards for the NSF outcomes found in Appendix A can act as indicators to measure the achievement of the outcomes (SCOA, 2016). However, given the breadth of these indicators a strict adherence to them during the evaluation would potentially measure outcomes that have been impacted by external factors [1], undermining the criterion validity of the research design (de Vaus, 2001). Consequently, the initial stages of the summative evaluation project aimed to first develop a program logic model as a conceptual framework of how the playgroups program achieve the settlement outcomes (Clarke, 1999). This model is found below in Table 1 and was adapted from the supported playgroups program logic template provided by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) (n.d.).

The creation of a conceptual framework involved deductive operationalisation of the settlement outcomes indicators so that they were more applicable to projected playgroup outcomes. This was done in reference to playgroup outcomes outlined in the literature as well as based on the project worker's own initial observations of the playgroups. Emphasis was placed on playgroup outcomes that overcame the barriers to successful settlement mentioned in the literature. These operationalised indicators are incorporated in the program logic as the short and medium-term outcomes of playgroups, while the NSF settlement outcomes are incorporated as the long-term outcomes of the playgroup program. The project worker developed the interview and focus group schedule found in Appendix B based on these short-term and medium-term outcomes.

[1] This includes other settlement services that participants may have engaged with.

Table 1: MIC Supported Playgroups Logic Model

Note: Adapted from "Supported Playgroup Program Logic", by Australian Institute of Family Studies (n.d.)

Objectives	Inputs	Participants	Activities	Short-term outcomes (3-6 months)	Medium-term Outcomes (6-12 months)	Long-term outcomes (12+ months)
To support each family's overall experience of settlement	Playgroup facilitator Other staff including interpreters and bi-cultural workers DSS Funding Links with local health and community services Research on playgroups Program resources such as toys Accessible venues with child-friendly spaces	Parents and preschool-aged children residing in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne from refugee backgrounds	Developmentally appropriate play-based activities, e.g., reading, games, outdoor play Social interaction between children and with facilitator Extracurricular activity sessions for families (e.g.: swimming lessons, school holiday excursions) Facilitation of parent and playgroup facilitator interaction Facilitation of parent social interaction Information sessions and referrals provided to families	Participants have increased access to broader cultural experiences outside of home such as the activities held at playgroup and excursions Parents increase skills, knowledge and confidence to supervise and provide developmentally appropriate play activities for their child Parents increase knowledge of principles of child development milestones and Australian parenting practices Children increase social interaction and language skills through developmentally appropriate play with carers Parents increase their social and support networks Parents increase knowledge of support services and community activities (family and health)	Parents have reduced social isolation and improved emotional wellbeing Parents have gained the confidence to independently access community and health services and participate in community activities Improved experience of integration into mainstream education system through activities encouraging play, social interaction and language practice Parents have increased resources and capacity to independently support their child's development in an Australian cultural context Maintenance of parent/child relationships during process of settlement	Improved health and wellbeing for families Increased engagement of families in broader Australian community Development of meaningful family and social relationships among parents and children

Prior to beginning data collection the project worker spent three weeks attending the three playgroups in order to gain contextual understanding of the playgroups through observation of the sessions and interaction with the playgroup leaders who oversee the groups.

5.1. Sampling

While the playgroup is a designated multicultural playgroup, the vast majority of playgroup participants are from Myanmar. Therefore, the sample of this study was limited to participants from Myanmar who attended within the past five years, as participants from other cultural groups were considered too statistically insignificant for inclusion in this evaluation. Although evaluation participants were drawn from speakers of all the four main language groups (Hakha Chin, Zomi, Karen, Falam Chin), language spoken was not incorporated into the selection criteria because the evaluation did not aim to compare the settlement experiences of different linguistic groups from Myanmar.

There were two primary sample populations of playgroup participants recruited for this evaluation. Figure 5.1 outlines the characteristics of these sample populations:

1. **Parent participants who attended playgroup for at least 12 months; and who had at least one child who had transitioned to kindergarten or preschool from playgroup**[2]

2. **Current parent participants who have attended playgroup for less than 12 months; and have not previously attended playgroup.** This group would act as a control group in order to allow for a longitudinal study that could compare the achievement of settlement outcomes during the early stage of playgroup attendance. Including newer participants reinforces the validity of the research design by limiting the possibility of measuring outcomes that had been influenced by the intervention of other factors (Dadich & Spooner, 2008)

[2] This included both participants who were currently attending playgroup with another child and those who no longer attended.

Figure 5.1 Characteristics of sample population groups

Sample population group	Length of attendance	Playgroup attendance status	Kindergarten/school attendance status	Previously attended with another child	Method of interview
1	Over 12 months	Previously or currently attending playgroup (within past five years)	Children who attended playgroup are now attending kindergarten or school	Current participants may or may not have attended previously	Telephone interview (for past participants) In-person interview (for current participants)
2	Less than 12 months	Currently attending playgroup	Children who attend playgroup may or may not be attending kindergarten or school	No	Focus group In-person interview

Participants for in-person interviews and the focus group were recruited onsite at the playgroup sessions. For telephone interviews with past participants, a sample frame was derived from MIC's client data. Overall, 21 mothers participated in this evaluation. Sixteen evaluation participants belonged to the first sample population, whilst the remaining five participants were drawn from the second sample population of newer participants. Figure 2, 3 and 4 provide a statistical overview of the evaluation participants in reference to location of playgroup attended, length of participation and type of interview respectively.[3]

[3] One past participant indicated that she had previously attended both the Ringwood and Croydon playgroup, and is included in the statistics for both of these sessions. Therefore, the overall number of participants in Figure 2 and 3 is 22, 1 more than the actual number who participated in this evaluation.

Figure 2: Evaluation participants by location of playgroup attended

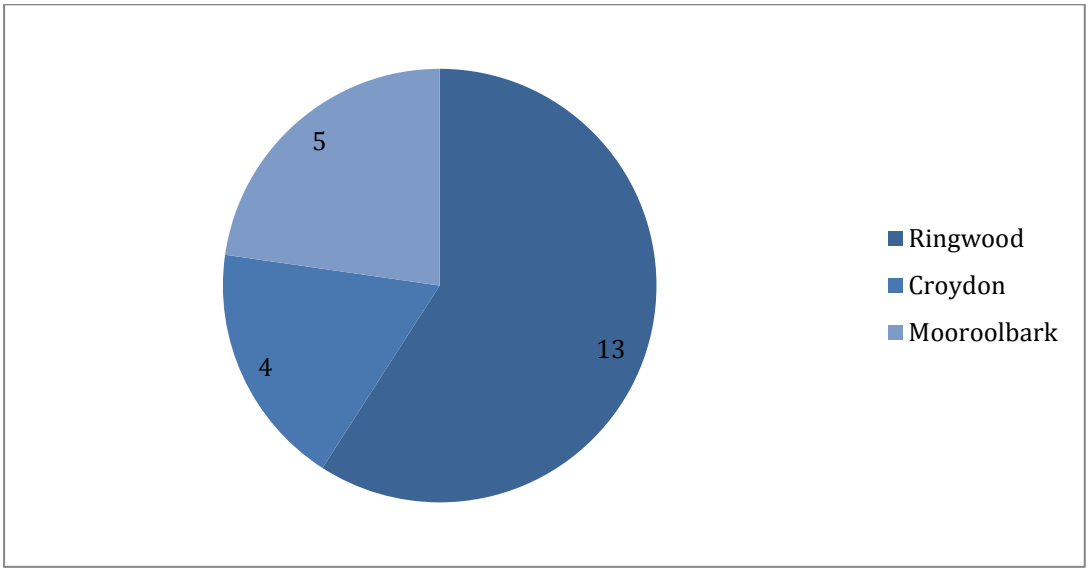


Figure 3: Evaluation participants by length of playgroup attendance

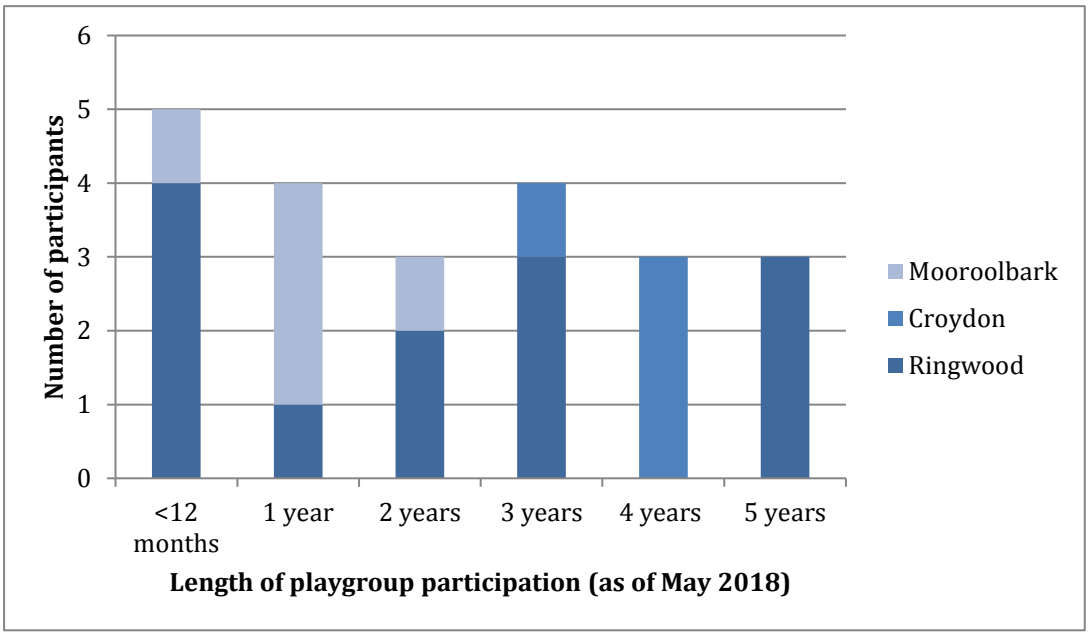
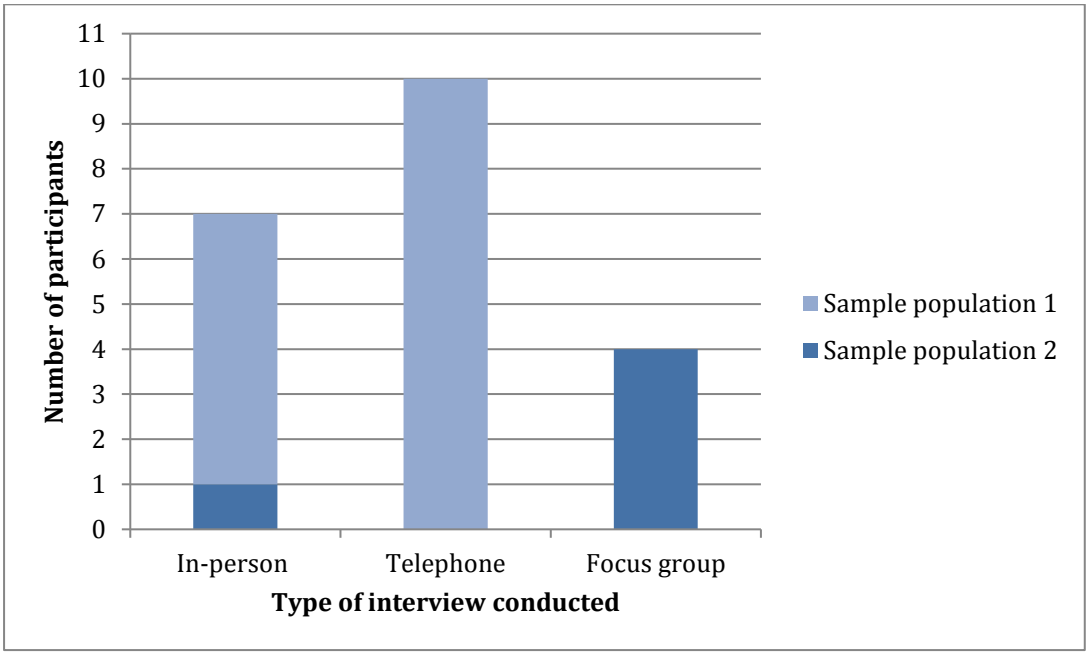


Figure 4: Evaluation participants by type of interview conducted



5.2. Methodology

A focus group was first conducted with four current Falam Chin-speaking participants who were identified as newer participants belonging to the second sample population. While the project worker initially aimed to hold one focus group at each of the playgroups to maximise the reliability of the evaluation (de Vaus, 2001), the significantly smaller numbers of newer participants at the Croydon and Mooroolbark groups and inconsistent attendance from participants meant that it was difficult to organise focus groups with an adequate number of eligible participants. The focus group was conducted during the Ringwood playgroup at the same venue with a Falam Chin interpreter. By holding it in an environment familiar to participants, the focus group provided participants a safe environment to explore the collective experience of participating in playgroups (Finch & Lewis, 2003).

Following the focus group, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants from the first sample population. In addition, one face-to-face interview was conducted with a mother from the second sample population. Use of a semi-structured interview allowed the project worker to control and frame the interview based on the operationalised NSF outcomes, while also providing a degree of flexibility so that the interviewees could reflect on their experience at the playgroups.

Interviews with this group were conducted both in-person with eligible mothers who were still attending playgroups as well as over the telephone with participants who no longer participated in playgroups. Telephone interviewing was adopted primarily for practical reasons, due to a limited amount of time and the logistics of organising in-person interviews with a sample that may have difficulty commuting to the MIC office in Box Hill (Bryman, 2012). The project worker was conscious of the limitations of

using telephone interviews, given the capture of rich data ideally requires consideration of the participant's physical responses to questions as embodied in their body language (Bryman, 2012; Legard, Keegan, & Ward, 2003). Nonetheless, as there is some evidence to suggest that participants are still willing to give expansive and in-depth responses in a telephone interview (Bryman, 2012), it was determined that MIC could still gain the rich data that this evaluation required.

The interviews and focus group were conducted with the assistance of an interpreter if the participants requested for one. An onsite interpreter was used for face-to-face interviews and the focus group, and telephone interpreters from the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) National were used for telephone interviews. There are a number of potential issues that can arise with the use of interpreters and their role as an additional interlocutor in the interview, such as the three-way production of data, selective translation, and unreliability of interpretation (Murray & Wynne, 2001). In an attempt to overcome some of these issues, the project worker first assessed the focus group and interview schedule with the assistance of MIC workers from Myanmar in order to refine and clarify the language and terms used in questions (Murray & Wynne, 2001).

5.3. Data Analysis

The interview and focus group data was analysed using an inductive thematic approach. The participants' responses were first categorised based on the interview questions that the response was addressing. The project worker then familiarised herself with the data through repeated readings of the categorised responses. Following this, the data was reiteratively coded through the concurrent processes of text segmentation and identification of meaningful themes in the responses to specific interview questions until saturation was achieved (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

Coding was conducted by two project workers. As similar themes would emerge in participants' responses to different interview questions, all the themes were then collated together and then refined through a process of visually mapping the links between the themes. Once all the data was coded, the themes that had emerged were then deductively analysed in relation to the research questions, as well as the NSF settlement outcome indicators. Some quantitative statistical data regarding the frequency of themes in participant responses was also derived from this coded data.

5.4. Limitations

This was MIC's first evaluation of the supported playgroups programs and is not preceded by any literature that conceptualises playgroups within the field of settlement services; therefore, this report is a substantial contribution to both MIC's knowledge base and the broader evidence on the benefits of supported playgroups. There are however a number of limitations of this study for future evaluations to take into account:

- The project attempted to achieve a longitudinal outlook by recruiting participants who had attended playgroup over a long period as well as newer participants. This meant that differences in outcomes between these two groups could be attributed to variance between individuals rather than change over time as a result of playgroup attendance.
- A restricted timeframe limited the scope of this evaluation. For example, the project worker did not have the opportunity to interview the playgroup staff as a supplementary sample (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003) that could provide an insight into how playgroups are organised to achieve settlement outcomes.
- The qualitative data obtained from the interviews and focus group illuminated the mechanisms by which playgroups achieved the settlement outcomes. Future evaluations, however, could triangulate this data by adopting a quantitative approach to measuring the settlement outcome indicators.

5.5. Ethics

The project worker involved was bound by MIC's Code of Ethics. This ensured that the identity of participants would remain confidential throughout the evaluation process. The confidentiality of the project was explained to all participants. The project worker obtained verbal consent from all participants to participate and be recorded (if applicable) prior to the interview or focus group.

6. Findings

This section details the findings of the interviews and focus group in consideration with the SCOA National Settlement Outcomes Framework indicators.

Nearly all (88%) of the participants who were asked about their reasoning for attending playgroup mentioned benefits for their children. In contrast, only one participant who was asked about the reasoning for attending playgroup mentioned benefits for herself. However, it emerged that nearly all participants, including both children and parents, had a highly positive experience at playgroup.

6.1. Settlement outcomes for children

6.1.1 Health and Wellbeing

Health and wellbeing outcomes for children were achieved primarily through increasing parents' awareness of the health issues that arise in childhood (SCOA, 2016). Eleven (52%) participants mentioned how information sessions had been helpful in providing them with information regarding healthy eating, dental health, and general information about children's health. This is discussed more extensively in the section on settlement outcomes for parents.

6.1.2. Civic Participation

6.1.2.1. Exposure to broader cultural experiences

Excursion to Royal Botanical Gardens

Many parents revealed that their experience of playgroups provided important exposure to and participation in the wider community for their children (SCOA, 2016). The desire for their children to be exposed to experiences outside of the home was a motivating factor for attending playgroups for two of the mothers who (along with other participants) expressed that their children have little opportunity to leave the home:

"Friend told me to go to playgroup, because we are usually alone at home".

"It's boring to stay at home, and I thought if my children go to playgroup they will enjoy playing with other kids".

Water Safety Program

In particular, the extracurricular activities linked to playgroup such as swimming sessions and school holiday excursions were identified as particularly valuable broader cultural experiences for the children. One mother conceptualised an excursion to the zoo as a learning experience for her child:


Excursion to Ringwood Library

"[My child] was able to see different animals and learn about different environments".

Every mother who participated in the study had participated in some form of extracurricular activity with her children, and nine participants (43%) described these activities as novel experiences for their children due to the difficulty of participating in these types of activities without playgroup:

"For myself, I don't know how to get there and go to the special places like where playgroup takes the group".

6.1.2.2. Development of independent capabilities and skills

Many mothers noted that their children had been able to develop social, behavioural and language skills at playgroup (SCOA, 2016). Much of this skill development was linked to the opportunity for their child to engage in social interaction at playgroup.

The specific types of capabilities and skills developed at playgroups are outlined below:

Improved confidence and independence

Nine (43%) participants observed an overall increased confidence in socialising with other children. A number of mothers also noted that through playgroup their children developed independence and the ability to cope with separation from their parents.

The majority of participants saw this confidence primarily as a result of social interaction at playgroup. As mentioned above, most children had limited experiences outside of the home or away from their parents. However, this did not mean that playgroup was necessarily the sole opportunity for children to socialise. Three participants noted that their children were able to socialise in other contexts (in particular, at church). Nonetheless, this did not diminish the value of playgroup as a different social experience for their children. Some participants also considered the socialisation at playgroup as having unique benefits for their children in comparison to other social experiences, which are discussed below.

A participant who had only been attending playgroup for six months noticed that although her children were no longer shy and more confident at playgroup compared to when they first attended, inconsistent attendance led to them becoming shy again. This suggests that long-term participation at playgroup is required to build children's social skills and overall confidence.

Development of behavioural skills

Five participants (24%) observed that participating in playgroup had developed their child's ability to share with others, and some of these participants perceived this to be a result of sharing toys in playgroup through interaction with other children. One of these participants mentioned this in order to differentiate playgroup with that of other social environments that children are exposed to such as church, arguing that

as a result of the need to share toys, children who attend playgroup are more "generous".

Another participant considered her children's development of behavioural skills was contingent on the expertise of playgroup facilitators in 'controlling' children:

"Playgroup is different from taking my children to my friend's place, because it is well organised, and at my friend's place the children are fighting for toys and I can't control…The playgroup is very organised, and the leaders can control children and the children are more disciplined".

Though playgroup is not always the only opportunity for children to socialise, the unique inputs of playgroup (i.e. the types of activities the children engaged with and the knowledge of program leaders) meant that it is more conducive to the development of capabilities such as sharing, more so than other social environments such as church.

Newer participants viewed their children's behaviour at playgroup as a tangible experience of how to act that can be then transposed to similar situations in other environments. A participant who had been attending for less than 12 months would use her child's experience of sharing at playgroup as a behavioural reference point in order to encourage them to act the same way in different situations:

"My child used to grab [toys] from someone else. When this happens, I told my child you have to do as you did in the playgroup, you must share and you must not grab for someone, and they do follow".

This example is an insight into the early stage of the process by which playgroups influence the behaviour of children. Continuous referral to the behavioural context at playgroup transforms the children's overall personality by cultivating their ability to share and take turns with other children. As a result, children are more likely to act in a similar way in a diverse range of contexts.

Learning development and language skills

Eight participants (38%) noted that their children have been able to improve their English language skills as a result of attending playgroup, including two participants who had been attending for less than 12 months. The participants tended to see this as developed through the type of activities that they engaged with in playgroup, such as singing songs, saying nursery rhymes and listening to stories in English. One participant also suggested that socialisation with other children also assisted with improving her child's English.

As many parents were not particularly fluent in English themselves, their ability to support the development of their child's English was limited. Consequently, many children were reliant on playgroup as an opportunity to improve their English skills.

"...We only speak Chin at home, but playgroup gives [the children] a chance to speak English with other children".

A participant who had been attending playgroup for less than 12 months suggested that the diverse range of participants at playgroup (in that participants come from many different language groups in Myanmar) has enabled her children to also pick up Burmese:

"Because my children, we speak Falam Chin, but here they have the Karen people, so they speak Burmese".

Other developmental skills that participants observed their children to have developed at playgroup include counting skills, motor skills, and learning colours.

6.1.2.3. Improved transition to kindergarten

A key way that the playgroup aims to "promote integration and participation in the wider community" (SCOA, 2016) is to improve children's school readiness for mainstream kindergarten and primary school. The majority of participants (62%) articulated specific ways in which playgroup attendance had assisted with preparing their child for kindergarten or primary school, including one mother whose children had not yet attended kindergarten. Many parents believed that this was a result of a noticeable increase in the confidence of their children, as linked with the aforementioned development of social capabilities and confidence. One parent whose two eldest children did not attend playgroup but whose two youngest children did describe a causal relationship between the participation in a social environment like playgroup and a smoother transition to kindergarten:

"I noticed that the younger two who went to playgroup were more familiar with other people and not afraid of strangers".

Some participants saw this confidence derived specifically from improved English language skills of their child; however, a newer participant whose child had already begun kindergarten suggested that language skills did not necessarily correlate to increased confidence at kindergarten:

"I want more interaction between the kids and the playgroup leader...Because when they attend kinder, they know how to speak English, but when the teacher speaks to them, they feel shy to answer".

Given that her child had attended playgroup for only a short period prior to starting kindergarten, it is likely that the child had not been exposed to a social environment that includes a figure of authority similar to a teacher in kindergarten. This supports

research that suggests the value of playgroup in increasing children's confidence for kindergarten is derived largely from the acclimatisation of children to such an environment, leading to an overall development of socio-emotional competence (Targowska et al., 2015).

The importance of playgroup as a similar environment to kindergarten is also exemplified through parents noting that the similarity of activities at playgroup with that of kindergarten helped acclimatise their children to the structure of kindergarten. Activities done at playgroup acted as a behavioural reference point for children when they entered kindergarten or primary school (Targowska et al., 2015):

> *"They **learn** from the playgroup, so they know how to **sing** and sit on the mat for **story time**...so they got more **confident**".*

Other capabilities developed in playgroup that were considered to be important for their child's preparation for kindergarten and primary school included the ability for their children to share and learn concepts such as colours.

6.1.3. Family and Social Support

The preservation of parent-child relationships during settlement (SCOA, 2016) was mostly evident through parents altering the ways in which they interacted with their children (as outlined later in this report). Nonetheless, one participant did suggest that the behavioural development (increased capability to share) of her children at playgroup had made a positive impact on the way her child interacted with her mother:

> *"I now **share** with my daughter, my daughter **used to** believe everything belonged to her...I **noticed in playgroup** if my daughter has a toy and another **child asks** her for a toy **she gives** it to them".*

Familial relationships are another context in which children are applying the skills that they have developed at playgroup.

6.2. Settlement outcomes for parents

6.2.1. Health and Wellbeing

6.2.1.1. Increased knowledge about health issues and access to services

As mentioned above, many participants found the information sessions held at playgroup an important way in which they gained increased awareness about health and wellbeing issues (SCOA, 2016). Some mothers also mentioned the utility of information sessions on women's health.

One participant discussed specific instances in which she had been able to respond to her child's sickness by applying the information she had learnt from the information sessions at playgroup:

> *"When your children sick...you give them children's Panadol or Nurofen, in that case we don't know how much amount we have to give them, and how many times a day...this the kind of thing [that I have learnt from playgroup]".*

In order to facilitate the practice of this information themselves, participants saw the value of these information sessions not only in their substantive content, but also in the frequency in which they are held and the fact that they are held in an accessible environment:

> *"Other than playgroup, most of the time we stay home with the kids, so we don't have that much information at all".*

"Even though I know [some of the information], it's easy to forget so when people come and tell us about it again it reminds us".

Another mother whose child had a medical condition indicated that the playgroup facilitator had previously provided support to access specialist health services for her child (SCOA, 2016):

> *"My youngest son has some medical condition, and I need to attend appointment at Royal Children's Hospital. I wasn't confident to go there alone, so [the playgroup leader] provided me someone to take me there...and also booked an appointment with an interpreter".*

In this particular instance the interpersonal familiarity with the participant and her circumstances allowed the playgroup leader to provide settlement casework support tailored to the needs of the family. Attending the playgroup enabled the facilitator to address the issue as the mother was not confident to approach the MIC settlement caseworkers for this kind of support herself. This confirms the importance of the playgroup as a 'soft-entry' point that enables and assists refugee families to access other settlement services (Riggs et al., 2012).

6.2.1.2. Reduction of social isolation

It emerged during the interviews and focus group that a number of participants did not have many opportunities to leave the house. While the participants did not mention any extreme feelings of social isolation, some disclosed that they sometimes felt emotionally restricted due to their limited opportunity to go outside:

> *"[Prior to attending playgroup] I always stayed at home and was bored".*

As a result, many participants considered playgroup to be a valuable experience outside of the home that contributed to their own happiness. Parents enjoyed their experiences at playgroup, such as the opportunity to gain knowledge about services and socio/cultural norms in Australia, partake in fun activities and socialise with other mothers:

> *"I'm also **happy** to come to playgroup, to **socialise** with other mothers, and **learn** new **information**, and also to go on excursions during school holidays".*

> *"If I **compared** to when I stay at **home by myself**, I am a little bit **bored**, but when I come here I **meet** other parents, and **share the happiness** around".*

Given that literature suggests a high degree of correlation between the social isolation of refugee women and increased risk of mental health issues (Targowska et al., 2015), attendance at playgroup can therefore act as a preventative measure to a common health issue that arises during settlement (SCOA, 2016).

6.2.2. Civic Participation

6.2.2.1. Increased knowledge of community norms and services

Alongside information sessions about health issues and services available to assist newly arrived families, information sessions about a broad range of community services and socio/cultural norms in Australia are also held at playgroups. The most useful topics for participants were Centrelink payments and eligibility (33%) and a presentation on pedestrian road safety and traffic rules for families with young children (21%).

> *"I have **learnt** how to resolve an issue with Centrelink by **myself** as it was **explained** to us at playgroup"*

Like the talks on health and wellbeing, participants valued the playgroups as increasing their awareness of services in the community (SCOA, 2016). For two participants, this was especially valuable regarding information sessions on Centrelink, a service they each found especially inconvenient to access. For them, gaining information about community services in the more approachable space of playgroup overcame the perceived inaccessibility of these particular services.

Some participants provided specific instances where they applied the information about Centrelink they gained at playgroup:

> *"Before I did **not know** anything about Centrelink as my husband did everything. After **learning** about it I did **attend myself** once".*

Just as with health and wellbeing issues, the information sessions on these topics held at playgroup have not only increased the participants' awareness of community services but have also empowered them to apply the information they have learnt to their own circumstances. This opportunity at playgroup is particularly important given the social isolation that many of these participants, mostly women, experienced and many expressed that it is one of the few chances for them to acquire this sort of

knowledge. In some instances therefore, the playgroups empower women from refugee backgrounds through acquisition of knowledge, helping them build confidence and independence as they apply this knowledge in other aspects of their lives.

6.2.2.2. Exposure to broader cultural experiences

Some participants derived holistic value from playgroup attendance as a means to participate in the wider community (SCOA, 2016). In particular, the extracurricular activities that playgroup held were once again for many participants an important broader cultural experience (SCOA, 2016) that exposed them to a variety of new environments. These experiences were often novel and valuable for participants due to their lack of knowledge in regards to how to participate in these sorts of experiences:

"I have no idea [about swimming programs]; I only know when I came to playgroup".

"I like [the excursions] because I do not know how to go to these places by myself".

Generally, these participants suggested that even after attending these activities through playgroup they did not feel they would participate in these experiences by themselves. A number of newer participants mentioned that this was because they enjoyed the fact that these activities (particularly the excursions) were highly social, and they were reluctant to go to these kinds of excursions by themselves without this social atmosphere:

"I might be able to go to these places by myself, but it might not be as fun as going in a group".

Participants also raised a number of barriers that hinder their ability to participate in these sorts of activities without playgroup:

"I don't think I'd go to the museum by myself...because I never go out".

"I wouldn't be able to do these things because my health is not good, and I have a lack of confidence".

"Swimming lessons are very expensive; I can't afford it".

Evidently, playgroup would often be the only opportunity in which many participants participated in these types of activities. For some, playgroup was the only means by which they were actually *enabled* to participate, even if afterwards they did not feel they could participate independently. For others, doing these activities in the social environment of playgroup increased the value of these experiences in comparison to participating by themselves.

There were also two participants who mentioned specific instances in which they had gone to the same types of places that they went during these playgroup excursions by themselves. Both of these participants explicitly referred to a link between participation at playgroup and development of their confidence and independent capabilities to go to these types of places again:

> ***"I have been to the park and library with playgroup...I couldn't do them myself since I didn't know how to borrow books. So playgroup is a lot of help by teaching me how to do this, and it is good to learn how to borrow books".***

> ***"Thanks to playgroup, I was able to build up my confidence to take my children to places such as the museum".***

In another particularly exceptional instance, one mother who has been attending playgroup since 2015 described that after participating in playgroup she became a volunteer at her child's kindergarten:

> *"Because of playgroup I know how to help at kinder as a parent helper...I prepare the food for all the kinder kids, and [I help out with] play activities...Because of the playgroup I know how to look after my kid and other kids too".*

As a result of playgroup exposing her to a similar environment at kindergarten, this participant gained familiarity with the activities and the skills required to actively contribute to the running of her child's kindergarten. These examples of participants suggest that attendance at playgroups is able to cultivate a degree of confidence in participants to independently seek out ways to participate in the community (SCOA, 2016).

Two participants suggested a link between attendance and improved language skills (in comparison to the eight participants who indicated that their child had improved their English skills). Whilst not necessarily a key outcome of playgroup, it indicates that for a small number of mothers playgroup can assist them to gain English language skills which is important as the existing literature suggests that language barriers

remain a significant barrier to broader civic participation (Warr et al., 2013). Subsequently, for those who do not gain English language skills, this will remain a hindrance to the extent to which playgroups are able to facilitate parents' participation in the broader community.

There are many cases of parents being able to apply their knowledge and experiences gained at playgroup in other contexts. However, some parents are still reliant on playgroup to access experiences such as visiting places on excursions and engaging their children in play activities. This is compounded by the limited language skills of participants, which remains a key barrier for parents in the development of these capabilities. Playgroups could further enhance the development of parents' independent capabilities by focusing on cultivating their skills and confidence to access these experiences themselves, beyond merely exposing participants to these experiences. As playgroups are a valuable entry-point to address a holistic range of settlement needs, MIC could consider incorporating other supported playgroup models, such as the 'Mother-Child English Language Program' (MCELP) that reorient some of the focus of playgroups towards English language development for parents (McDonald et al. 2014).

6.2.2.3. Improved transition to kindergarten

When asked about the ways playgroup prepared their children for kindergarten, 10 participants (48%) referred to practical assistance they received at the playgroup with enrolling their children in kindergarten, generally by helping parents to fill out application forms. This fits into the aforementioned pattern of the playgroups acting as a gateway for accessing other community services by assisting with and increasing awareness of any logistical issues that can arise when using these services, along with breaking down barriers some people, particularly socially isolated women might face in seeking support from settlement services (SCOA, 2016).

Additionally, many mothers felt more supported to prepare their children for kindergarten through learning about how to prepare food for their children in a new socio-cultural context (Targowska et al., 2015):

"I was able to learn how to prepare food and lunch for the child in the future".

"I also know what to do to prepare my children for kindergarten, for example preparing Western food for them, which is strange for us".

Beyond assisting with access to kindergartens, playgroup has also been instrumental in increasing parents' understanding of the mainstream kindergarten and primary school systems and norms, allowing their children to participate at school more comfortably (Targowska et al., 2015).

6.2.3. Family and Social Support

6.2.3.1. Improved relationship with children

"…traditionally Chin people scold their children, but playgroup ***taught me*** *how to be* ***patient*** *and to* ***talk*** *to them. When they are crying or unhappy, I try to* ***encourage*** *them, not scold them, and* ***patiently talk*** *to them".*

Many parents perceived positive changes to their relationship with their children as a result of attending playgroup. For example, some participants elucidated changes in their parenting practices after attending playgroup:

"...The leader of the [playgroup] was making and encouraging all the children to participate, and told mothers you shouldn't do everything that they want to do...when they participated in playgroup sometimes I did everything for them...now I learn not to spoil the children".

Similar to the impacts that playgroup had on their child's behaviour, for newer parents the exposure to the way in which the playgroup leader interacted with the children encouraged them to reflect on the ways they themselves interacted with their children:

"When I see other kids listening [to playgroup leader], I'm thinking how I can teach my children also to be quiet when someone is talking".

Playgroup comes to influence the participants' parenting practices by modelling different approaches of behaviour (Warr et al., 2013). By presenting the model in practice from a trustworthy figure like the playgroup leader, parents are more able to relate to these culturally unfamiliar behavioural models (Warr et al., 2013). This assists parents to independently apply these models to different contexts (SCOA, 2016). This behaviour also acquires a positive acculturation function through the participants' juxtaposition of the playgroup leaders' behaviour with their self-identified 'traditional' and culturally specific behaviour. Parents are encouraged to not only integrate new styles of parenting but also to reflect on how these parenting practices are useful for them (SCOA, 2016).

Many saw an improved relationship as a result of the opportunity playgroup gave for parents to play with their children. Often participants would use the play activities from playgroup to play with children at home:

"Playgroup taught us how to make play doh and play together. We make it at home together, and we play together and we sing together, so whatever we learn from here we copy at home, so our relationship is closer and closer".

Attending playgroup has exposed this participant to a multitude of play activities that implies that there is an inherent link between playing with children and an increased feeling of 'closeness' in their relationship with them. Like the case with parenting practices, playgroup has therefore provided participants a model for interacting with their children in a way that has positive benefits for their overall relationship.

It is important to note that these benefits of play activities are contingent on participants perceiving the activities as something that they can replicate at home. Some participants discussed certain difficulties in adopting the playgroup activities at home. For example, though both the mothers and children spend most of their time at home together, some of the participants indicated that they still had limited time to dedicate to playing with their children:

> *"I did not do activities with kids at home as too busy with domestic duties and picking up and taking older kids to school. After playgroup I still did not play because of other duties at home. My son did a lot of learning at playgroup".*

Another mother who had replicated some of the activities learnt at playgroup to play at home found it difficult to replicate other activities due to her limited English language skills:

> *"When [my children] get home, they also want to read story, and they ask me to explain it to them but I don't speak English, so it's hard".*

A small number of other participants also believed that playing at playgroup was more valuable than playing at home, as it is an environment that children can socialise in. One mother noted that her daughter didn't enjoy playing at home due to a lack of friends to play with. All these participants who feel unable to play with their children at home are heavily reliant on playgroup as the sole opportunity for their children to engage in play activities with them. While recognising there are some participants who do not have sufficient time to play at home, those who do not feel confident enough to play with their children are still potentially missing out on the benefits of play as a way of building their relationship with their children.

6.2.3.2. Increased opportunity for socialisation

Fifteen participants (71%) experienced playgroup as an opportunity for them to socialise and develop linkages with other families (SCOA, 2016). Many parents indicated playgroup was not their sole chance to socialise with other parents, as they generally were also able to socialise in other settings such as church and at community gatherings. Nonetheless, many still were appreciative of the opportunity to socialise at playgroup. When asked about their overall enjoyment of playgroup, some participants specifically mentioned their experience of socialising with new people at playgroup:

> ***"[I enjoy] meeting with other parents, and building relationships as well".***

A couple of participants still saw themselves as having limited opportunity for socialising with other people, and thus valued participating in a social activity like playgroup:

"I just don't want to go around and visit people's house for no reason, so it's better to go to playgroup".

While acknowledging that they are presented with other opportunities for socialisation by virtue of their proximity to other people, often mothers saw these opportunities as domains that are not particularly conducive for socialising. Playgroup, in contrast, is conceived of as a naturalistic social context where active socialisation is normalised.

"Before** in my neighbourhood we all lived together but **we didn't** mix together even though we lived in the same area. **After** meeting at playgroup we have **become friends** and now **visit each other".

Even though the vast majority of playgroup participants are from Myanmar, participants still saw playgroup as a beneficial opportunity to meet a diverse range of people:

"The playgroup was all people from Myanmar but from different groups, so we spoke different languages".

"From playgroup, I was able to make new friends and chat with other mothers from different countries".

As some participants indicated that each church community tend to be derived from one linguistic community, playgroup is therefore one of the few opportunities for participants to socialise with a more diverse range of people outside of their own linguistic community, as well as people not from Myanmar (SCOA, 2016).

"Because of making friends I can ask them questions about children or school, can call them and ask them about it".

A couple of participants also discussed how they had gained a degree of parenting support from the social relationships they developed at playgroup:

"I meet with my friends to talk about our kids and kinder".

Through the exchanging of knowledge with other parents on a variety of topics and shared experiences (Warr et al., 2013), participants build a social support network at playgroup. Subsequently, these parents gain a sense of support to draw upon when navigating parenting in a new cultural context (New et al., 2015). This is particularly beneficial given the literature on the difficulties for refugee parents of parenting [particularly for those] who may initially lack traditional support networks in Australia (McLaughlin 2012; Warr et al., 2013).

6.3. Barriers to success

When asked about changes they would make to playgroup, some participants noted a number of logistical issues with current playgroups. This was particularly evident for the Ringwood playgroup, which has a significantly larger number of participants than the other two playgroups. Below are comments from current participants of the Ringwood playgroup:

> *"For the helper...if they had two or three it would be better, because there are a lot of children".*

> *"This time I feel it's overcrowded. There are too many new parents who don't know playgroup rules and we have to tell them to stop talking...sometimes I don't want to go because of it. There are too many interpreters, and we can't hear each other, but everyone can speak Burmese".*

> *"The place is too small. Sometimes when there are many people it's really crowded and we can't move around. The old one in the Uniting Church was really good...it had very big space…[currently it is] too small for many people".*

> *"Now playgroup is very popular and a lot of families are attending. This has resulted in parking difficulties and the number is very big...It is difficult because all the children are different ages, and the younger children have only just begun to crawl, so it would be better to split it".*

Evidently, many participants feel that the sheer number of participants in the Ringwood playgroup has diminished their experience at playgroup. Participants feel that there are difficulties with moving around a limited space with the number of people at the playgroup, and that the children are unable to be controlled under the current structure. Though this was a concern for both newer and older participants, participants who had been attending for a lengthier period of time were the ones to express a difference in the needs of all the participants (whether it be based on length of participation or age of children). For these participants, there is a risk of the discomfort experienced at playgroup resulting in a diminished desire to attend.

The sheer size of the Ringwood playgroup has evidently negatively impacted the experience of playgroup for many participants, to the extent that one participant indicated that it diminishes her desire to attend. There is therefore a possibility that newer participants of the Ringwood playgroup may find the sessions at playgroup too chaotic and decide not to attend continuously.

Given that this report has found long-term participation at playgroup to contribute significantly to the achievement of the settlement outcomes[4], additional playgroups

[4] It should be noted, however, that newly arrived refugees and family stream migrants are eligible for settlement services for the first five years from the date of their arrival to Australia. This means that alternative sources of

are required in Ringwood so that participants are more willing to attend and for a longer period of time. By increasing the number of sessions of the Ringwood playgroup, MIC can address the concerns of the current participants in relation to the overcrowding at playgroup without restricting the number of participants who can attend.

A number of factors has impacted on the increasing number of families who attend the Ringwood playgroup. These factors included: the need to move the playgroup to a smaller community venue because the previous venue (and an alternative venue of the same size) were no longer available; the number of families living in the area and attending the playgroup increased; and, 'word of mouth' from participants promoting the playgroup to their family and friends.

Another source of tension for participants was the observed difference in developmental needs between the children, due to the diverse ages of the child participants. Increasing the number of sessions and dividing playgroups (particularly the Ringwood playgroup) based on age of child would not only address this concern but allow MIC to better address the specific needs of the participants. For example, health information sessions and activities done at playgroup could be tailored to the age of the children in a particular session. Nonetheless, implementation of this could be difficult given that some parents will have children of different ages and may be unwilling to attend more than one playgroup session or have no one they can leave a child with at home whilst they attend a playgroup session with another child.

In 2018/2019, MIC does not have the capacity to facilitate additional supported playgroups through the current funding levels of the Settlement Grants Program. However, the MIC has received funding through the MIC's Eastern Metropolitan Refugee and Asylum Seeker Strategic Partnerships Program funded by the Victorian Government Department of Multicultural Affairs and Social Cohesion (MASC) to establish an additional supported playgroup in Ringwood. Unlike settlement services, this program can include families who have been in Australia for more than five years.

Other actions include: seeking additional funding sources to establish new supported playgroups and working with mainstream agencies to support them to establish supported playgroups based on the model developed by MIC. These actions would provide an opportunity to match children according to their age whilst still providing some flexibility for mothers who have more than one child of different ages to attend the same group.

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funding would be required for supported playgroups for refugee families resident in Australia after five years from their arrival.

7. Conclusions

The findings from this report indicate that MIC's supported playgroups have numerous benefits for both children and parents. The MIC's supported playgroups have been able to achieve all three of the relevant settlement outcomes for both child and parent participants. Both newer and longer-term participants perceived similar outcomes from playgroups. Many of the findings confirm the commonly experienced playgroup outcomes suggested in existing literature; however, in this evaluation the findings suggested that these participants often conceptualised these outcomes within their experience of settlement, and therefore the achievement of settlement outcomes. This occurred primarily in two ways:

- **Playgroups as enabling exposure to broader community and experiences:** Playgroup was often conceived of as a 'soft-entry' point that increased participants' knowledge of and access to a multitude of health and community services, including reducing barriers to accessing settlement services, as well as providing exposure to broader cultural experiences such as excursions to museums, libraries, parks and other public places.

- **Playgroup itself as exposure to a broader community and an environment that cultivates social, behavioural and language skills:** Both parent and child participants had opportunities to socialise with others outside of their language/cultural group, learn new things and build their English language skills. Newer participants clarified that this is a result of the idiosyncrasies of the playgroup environment encouraging participants to behave in certain ways that then acted as a model for participants' behaviour in other contexts. Longer-term participation is fundamental to the reinforcement of these skills.

The playgroups' overall achievement of settlement outcomes became more evident in light of the fact that most participants did not leave their home often and that most parent participants are women, placing them at greater risk of social isolation than their male relatives. Subsequently, these participants had very few other opportunities for similar experiences, illustrating the important role of playgroups in empowering women with new knowledge, skills and social interactions and the confidence to implement these learnings in other contexts. This highlights the need for MIC playgroups to continue to be developed and implemented to holistically address the diverse range of settlement needs for participants.

8. Recommendations

- **MIC to continue to facilitate supported playgroups to assist newly arrived parents of pre-school aged children from refugee backgrounds in achieving positive settlement outcomes particularly in relation to health and wellbeing, civic participation and family relationships.**
- **Identify additional funding sources and early childhood services that can facilitate additional supported playgroups for families from refugee backgrounds.**
- **To further enhance settlement outcomes, consult playgroup participants to identify whether they would like to incorporate a formal English as an Additional Language (EAL) component at the playgroup to increase parents' English language skills.**

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SCOA NATIONAL SETTLEMENT SERVICES OUTCOMES STANDARDS RELEVANT TO PLAYGROUPS

Health and Wellbeing

- New arrival communities have access to appropriate, affordable and quality health services and interventions.
- Support and education is provided to assist new arrival communities to navigate the Australian health systems and to understand their rights.
- Health and wellbeing risks that emerge leading up to and during the settlement process are assessed and responded to in collaboration with specialist services.
- Services include preventative measures aimed at promoting increased awareness about health and wellbeing during settlement and early responses to problems that arise.
- Responses to health and wellbeing issues are sensitive to the specific circumstances of clients such as familiarity with health interventions, culture, language, age, background, religion, experiences of trauma and cognitive capacity.
- Services are underpinned by an evidence base.

Civic Participation

- Newly arrived communities are linked to community based organisations and activities of their choice that promote integration and participation in the wider community.
- Settlement services include community engagement programs that support preservation of cultural practices as well as opportunities that provide exposure to broader cultural experiences and a sense of belonging within the Australian context.
- Service emphasise the development of independent capabilities through access to knowledge and skills development.
- Services contribute to an ongoing evidence base of effective settlement services by documenting system and practice responses that achieve sustainable civic participation.
- Newly arrived communities are provided with information and pathways to Australian Citizenship.
- Community orientation programs provide effective and timely information to newly arrived communities and reinforce knowledge of rights under the law as well as creating awareness about services and supports in their local community.
- Services actively promote and develop community cultural events that encourage cultural celebration and intercultural dialogue with a view to creating community harmony and minimising racism.

Family and Social Support

- Support is provided to assist families to preserve relationships during the various challenges associated with settlement and the adjustment to new social and community norms.
- Newly arrived communities are supported to preserve their cultural identity and values whilst integrating new Australian values and norms.
- Services provide access to spaces, activities and services that support cultural practice as well as opportunities that provide exposure to broader cultural experiences within the Australian context.
- Specific strategies are implemented to support families to not undervalue the specialised needs of children, youth, women and men.
- Services establish linkages that enable referral pathways to breadth range of family support services including education, child safety, health, legal and parenting programs.
- Families are supported to develop linkages within and outside of their own cultural community.

Note: Adapted from "National Settlement Services Outcomes Standards", by Settlement Council of Australia, 2016.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE

- Where did you hear about the playgroups?
- Why did you initially want to attend?
- Did you enjoy your time at playgroups?

Improved Health and Wellbeing

- The playgroups often hold many information sessions and talks from health and community services. What kinds of information have you found useful?
- Did the playgroups make you more confident in accessing the services yourself?
- How did going to playgroups affect you and your child's happiness?
    - [*prompt as necessary*] Were you able to socialise more through playgroups?

Increased engagement and participation in the broader Australian community

- Did you participate in any of the playgroups extracurricular activities? For example, the swimming sessions or excursions during the school holidays.
    - What do you like about these sessions?
    - Would you have participated in these kinds of activities without playgroup?
- In what ways did playgroup prepare you and your child for kindergarten?
    - [*prompt as necessary*] Did playgroups help increase your understanding of kindergartens?
    - [*prompt as necessary*] What were the benefits for your child's social and language skills?
    - [*prompt as necessary*] Did you or your child have any difficulties when beginning kindergarten?

Development and maintenance of meaningful family and social relationships among families

- Do you think the activities in playgroup were helpful for your child? For example, reading to your child, playing outdoors, playing with toys.

    - Did you ever use these activities to play with your child at home?
- How has coming to playgroup affected your relationship with your child?
- How did playgroup affect your social life?
- Was there anything about playgroup that you would've liked to change?
    - [*prompt as necessary*] Did you have any issues with your experience at playgroup?
    - How else could have playgroups supported you or your child?