The target group for the Supported Playgroup are children aged birth – 5 years who have a developmental delay or disability and their families. Parents are primarily from Wollongong, although we have families from Shellharbour and Kiama areas as well.

There are a number of families with young children (Birth – 5 years) in Wollongong. According to the 2016 Census, there are 12,034 children between the ages of birth – 4 years (Census 2016).

In relation to disability, District data profiles show that in Wollongong, 6.4% of the population need help or assistance with core activities. This equates to 13,082 individuals (with an additional 977 in Kiama and 4,593 in Shellharbour (Census, 2016). While this does not only reflect children from birth – 5 years with a developmental delay or disability, it does demonstrate the significance of disability in our region.

Families who have children with disabilities face a number of challenges that are unique to their population. A diagnosis of disability or concern about children’s development can cause stress and anxiety on top of that experienced by parents of typically developing children (Felizardo Ribeiro & Amante, 2016; Kerr & McIntosh, 2000). A substantial body of literature documents the stresses experienced by many parents who have a child with a disability. In addition to feelings of grief, loss and guilt, parents commonly

### CURRENT SITUATION

**TEI Program Activity:** Program Activity 4: Provide Targeted Support

**TEI Service Type:** Supported Playgroup

**Service Description:** Playgroup for Children with Additional Needs

Supported playgroups are weekly playgroups facilitated by trained workers. The supported playgroup for Children with Additional Needs is to provide support to children with a disability or developmental delay and their families.

- Free and structured play experiences/activities for children
- Informal discussions with parents to identify goals and priorities for children so playgroup can provide consistent approaches
- Targeted experiences/activities to support children’s social, emotional, cognitive, physical and communication development
- Information and guidance for parents which may include speakers to assist in advocacy, referral to other services or support in accessing an ECEC centre
- Support for parents in adjusting to life with a child with a disability
- Networking opportunities for parents

Supported playgroups have a dual focus on supporting the development and wellbeing of children and their parents (Jackson, 2013) by creating an opportunity for carers to meet and share experiences, and for children to play, learn and socialise (Boddy & Cartmel, 2011: CCCH: Jackson, 2011, 2013, cited in Commerford & Robinson, 2016).

Playgroups are a ‘soft entry’ point for families to become better connected to the informal and formal networks in their communities (Commerford & Robinson, 2016). The social support gathered through these smaller, facilitated groups assists parents in developing knowledge of the local community, gaining confidence in their parenting ability and joining networks with other families, resulting in an increased likelihood that families will feel confident to engage with other services in the future (Moran & Ghate, 2016).

Quotes from parents:

"Being part of the playgroup has helped me grow as a person – they have taught me to embrace the child we have and help us through the whole diagnosis process. The staff will be part of our family forever"

"The beginning of my journey was horrible with lots of tears and self esteem kicking, it grew into laughs, a brand new beautiful preschool, transitioning onto an early intervention preschool, friendships a sense of greater belonging and less blame (and only the big appointments needing someone to come with me to advocate for my loss of words.) There is no way on this Earth that I could have gotten..."
experience psychological and social consequences such as isolation, social marginalisation, stigmatisation and disempowerment (Seligman & Darling, 2008). An important coping resource is social support, including practical help, information and emotional support, which can, among other functions, enhance family well-being and capacity to parent (Armstrong, Binie-Lefcovitch, & Ungar, 2015, cited in Wright et al 2019).

This group is particularly vulnerable to social isolation and increased stress. Without attending supported playgroup at this crucial time, isolation and feelings of despair can increase.

“by without the support I have received.”

“The educators have become part of our family and support circle. We love the support, kindness and love they have shown our child and our family”

enmeshed. The importance of the partnerships between family and the supported playgroup sits centrally within the mesosystem of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (see diagram below).

(Bronfenbrenner, 1992)

References:

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Model – adapted for children with a disability (Warren, 2013)