

*'He made his first  
friend at Playgroup.'*

*Garry, 43*



## Intensive Playgroup Model

Briefing Paper by UnitingCare ReGen

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## Executive Summary

UnitingCare ReGen's Intensive Playgroup program was established in 2004 to support families with young children (0-5 years) who are affected by a parent's alcohol or other drug (AOD) use or otherwise deemed to be vulnerable to a range of potential harms.

The program currently caters for 50-60 families per year across five sites in Moreland, Banyule and Hume City.

The development of partnerships with Anglicare Broadmeadows, Anglicare Family Services, Hume Maternal and Child Health, CPS, Banyule Community Health and Banyule Maternal and Child Health services enabled the expansion of the Intensive Playgroup program to provide early interventions with vulnerable families in Hume who are at increased risk of escalating AOD-related harms. The programs are funded by the state and federal governments.

The ReGen Intensive Playgroup supports at-risk families with practical parenting advice, developmental play activities for children and facilitated linkages with a variety of health and community services. ReGen is a Professional Member of Playgroup Victoria.

The program has demonstrated its effectiveness as a vehicle for increasing at-risk families' engagement with key health and community support services. Since its inception, the program has shown the positive benefits for children's emotional and physical development as well as parents' confidence in their capacity to meet their own and their families' needs.

The ReGen Intensive Playgroup program was a finalist in the 2007 Victorian Early Years Awards for achievements within the Early Childhood sector.

'It's a learning process. You get confident and then it's just crushed again when other problems arrive. Then you build it up again and you're forever changing your tactics. It's a hard game really. Each stage has different challenges. You get over one and there's another one you have to tackle.' Karen, 35

## Program Development

Established in 2004 in response to identified concerns about the capacity of AOD treatment providers to respond holistically to the needs of individual service users and their family members, the ReGen Intensive Playgroup model has proven to be effective in supporting parents who are focussed on controlling their alcohol and other drug use.

As a service not traditionally associated with AOD treatment, Playgroup does not hold the same sort of stigma associated with AOD services such as counselling, withdrawal or rehabilitation. Parents see it as something positive for them and their children, not something problem-focussed.

The aims of the Intensive Playgroup were to support and assist substance-using parents to provide better care to their young children, cope more effectively with the stresses of parenting and engage more effectively with drug treatment, while providing positive socialisation opportunities for their children.

After securing permanent funding for the program in 2008 under an innovative collaborative agreement between three branches of the then Department of Human Services (AOD Services, Child Protection & Child and Family Services), program eligibility was extended to include any family experiencing complex needs and delivery was expanded beyond the Moreland site to Broadmeadows.

Since that time, the Intensive Playgroup has proven to be successful in attracting participants with a diverse range of support needs, including families who have recently arrived in Australia, are socially isolated and have limited awareness of the Victorian health and community service systems. Due to increasing referrals and numbers of families attending, the number of program sessions provided at the Broadmeadows site has been increased from one to two per week.

The ReGen Intensive Playgroup program was listed as an example of good practice of addressing the needs of children and families in the Victorian Department of Human Services' A new blueprint for alcohol and other drug treatment services 2009-2013 (p 25).

'When you feel like you are doing something good for your child, you feel more confident as a parent.' Kay, 28

### **The ReGen Intensive Playgroup Model**

Playgroup provides a flexible model for assisting parents to engage with treatment and support services, including: alcohol and other drug treatment, child protection, mental health, maternal and child health and family support. Families who move through the program are encouraged to recontact for support, information and/or referral if needed.

### **Target Group**

Parents with a pre-school age child or children (between 0 and 5 years of age) who also have (or are at risk of developing) complex needs including AOD dependence or significant mental health issues.

### **Aims**

- To strengthen relationships between parents and their children and build parents' confidence in their capacity to care for their families.
- To promote child safety, well-being and self-esteem.
- To increase families' sense of connectedness and social inclusion.
- To enhance parenting capacity and reduce the need for child protection interventions.
- To support families in responding to complex and interrelated issues, including engagement with services such as Maternal and Child Health, pre-school, child care, AOD and mental health treatment.

The location of the program at the Broadmeadows Maternal and Child Health centre provides families with improved access to Maternal and Child Health nurses and supported referrals to specialist services, where required. Many of the families attending the program are newly arrived and from CALD backgrounds.

These families tend to be isolated from mainstream services due to language and cultural barriers. Group facilitators continue to link families attending with local services including: counselling, kindergarten, childcare, schools and local health services.

In addition, many of the families attending the program are affected by substance use and or mental health issues. Program sessions also provide opportunities for participating families with Child Protection involvement to have access visits with children who are currently not in their care.

This group is fulfilling an important early intervention/ prevention strategy for isolated families and provides the opportunity to promote AOD treatment services in the Hume area, to enhance parent child

interaction, and to increase social connectedness and enhance the mental health and wellbeing and self esteem of children, parents and caregivers attending.

'The support is wonderful because, if you don't have that support, some days it's hard to get through.' Sesuna, 25

### Program Outcomes

ReGen Intensive Playgroup has proven effective in meeting the support needs for parents who are focussed on managing their complex needs, whose lives are comparatively stable and has engaged families experiencing social isolation, mental health issues and AOD issues. Intensive Playgroup is solution focussed and consequently families tend to view it as a positive that can assist them in strengthening their relationship with their children. Because traditionally Playgroup is not seen as something that is associated with treatment, parents tend to experience Intensive Playgroup as something positive for them and their children, not something problem-focussed.

Clients have consistently reported positive outcomes from their engagement with Playgroup including:

- Feeling less isolated within their community and more aware of the supports that are available;
- Feeling accepted and supported (not judged), and that they can be honest about their struggles, rather than having to pretend, out of fear of possible reprisals;
- Feeling more confident as parents and knowing that they are doing well for their children. Reducing their and their children's social isolation; improving social and support networks;
- Recognising that their children are more socially confident and demonstrate improved physical, emotional and cognitive development;
- Feeling more comfortable with making use of other health or community support services.

'She wasn't a very sociable child before Playgroup because I never went out. I wasn't confident with her to take her to the park or anything so Playgroup was a really great place for her to meet other kids.'

Shelley, 31

### Future development

The ReGen Intensive Playgroup model has proven to be effective in engaging parents with young children with a range of treatment and support options. The broad familiarity of Playgroups amongst the general population provides a readily identifiable service model for expanding the reach of AOD treatment providers beyond those families experiencing acute AOD-related harms to a wider target group of vulnerable or at-risk families. ReGen will continue to develop and expand this positive early intervention to prevent the future escalation of complex needs including AOD-related harms for parents and their children.

'I didn't have to pretend that I was anything that I wasn't... I didn't have my defensive walls up. I didn't have to lie about my life or where I lived or what my circumstances were, or had been.'

Robyn, 29

**If you would like more information please contact Donna Ribton-Turner, Director of Clinical Services at ReGen on 03 9386 2876 or visit [www.regen.org.au](http://www.regen.org.au)**

## About ReGen

Our purpose is to promote health and reduce alcohol and other drug related harm.

ReGen is the lead Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) treatment and education agency of UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania. ReGen is a not-for-profit agency, which has over 40 years experience delivering a comprehensive range of AOD treatment and education services to the community.

These services include Counselling and Support, Assessment and Intake, Community Outpatient, Home-based and Residential Withdrawal for adults and youth, Supported Accommodation, Drug Diversion programs, Youth and Family Services, an Intensive Playgroup, Alcohol Community Rehabilitation Program and AOD services at Port Phillip Prison. ReGen also delivers Education and Training programs nationally.

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