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Physically Distanced but Socially Connected: Interactive Playgroup Sessions Delivered Remotely during the COVID-19 Lockdown

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Abstract
In 2020, Melbournians were subjected to one of the world's longest and strictest pandemic-necessitated lockdowns. Prior to lockdown, many Australian families received social support from their local playgroup, a group of children (birth-5 years) and their parents who meet regularly to play and socialize. Playgroup at Home LIVE (PAHL), the online adaptation, was developed to address a recognized need. Survey responses from 338 (out of 2,046) PAHL participants suggested that families experienced similar benefits between PAHL and in-person sessions; these included social connections, routine, and play, which may have mitigated the negative impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on children and their parents.

Keywords: playgroup, parent-child engagement, COVID-19, remote interaction, social connection

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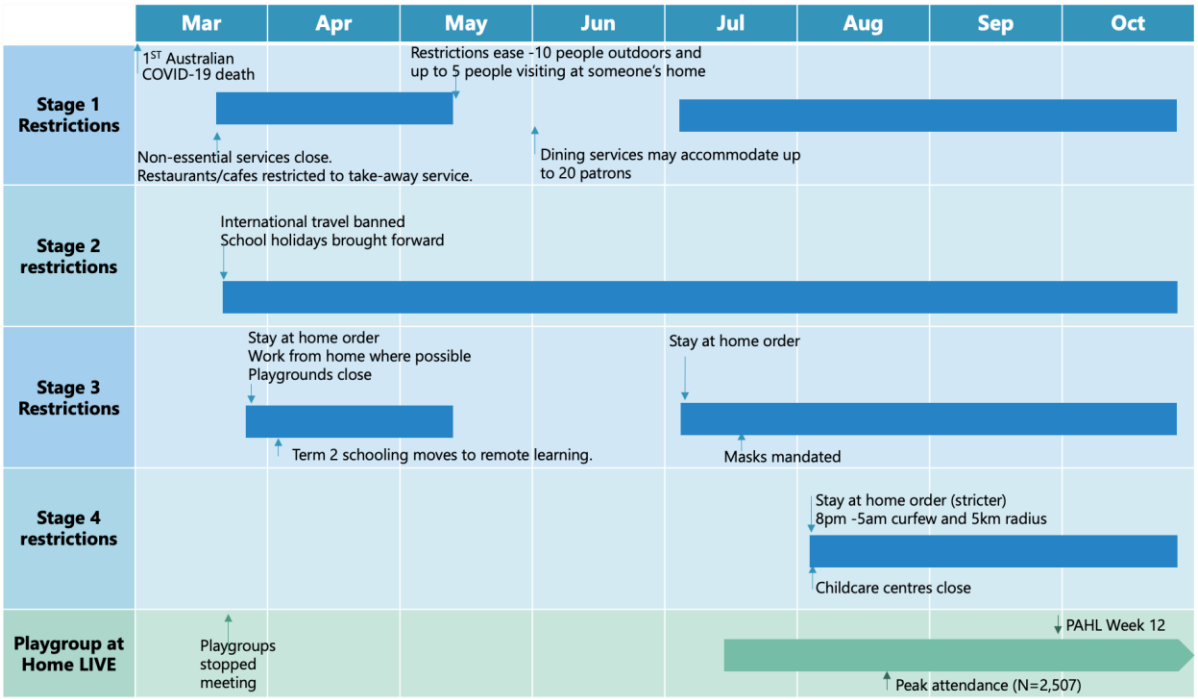
Background

The impacts of COVID-19 have been felt the world over; in addition to the obvious health toll, the pandemic has caused pervasive economic and social consequences (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). Social distancing measures, stay-at-home orders, cities in lockdown, closure of public spaces, and the like have caused social isolation so severe that many individuals experienced degradations to their mental health or an exacerbation of pre-existing symptoms (Sher, 2020). Children and families have been especially impacted by these conditions, including the prolonged exposure to stress and uncertainty (Morelli et al., 2020; Saladino et al., 2020; Stark et al., 2020).

Residents of Melbourne, in the state of Victoria, Australia's second-most populous city (4.9 million), experienced one of the world's longest and strictest pandemic-necessitated lockdowns of 2020 (Gross et al., 2020). Beginning in March 2020, social distancing measures (termed Stage One restrictions) were implemented Australia-wide to slow the spread of COVID-19. Figure 1 illustrates the timeline of restrictions in Victoria between March and October 2020. As the number of cases grew, so too did the limitations on social mobility. The world was watching as case numbers in Italy grew exponentially and infection rates in the U.S. surpassed China's. Just weeks after the Stage One restrictions were implemented nationally, Melbournians entered Stage Three restrictions, including a stay-at-home order permitting people to leave their homes only for four reasons: food and supplies, medical care, exercise, and work/education (Storen & Corrigan, 2020).

Figure 1. Key COVID-19 dates between March and October 2020, including restrictions affecting residents of metropolitan Melbourne



The most severe measures (Stage Four restrictions) implemented a curfew, 5km travel radius limit, and the closure of many businesses and public spaces including childcare centers and playgrounds. Victorians were already suffering from job loss and other economic stressors from the initial fallout of the pandemic, but this announcement caused a new wave of consequences. The crisis mental health hotline, *Lifeline,* received 30% more calls from Victorians when the Stage 4 restrictions were announced (Kinsella, 2020). Additionally, parents working from home were tasked with full-time childcare responsibilities in the advent of childcare closures (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2020). Parental stress, social isolation and confinement, and loss of routine were all consequences of Australian life in lockdown uncertainty (de Young et al., 2021). These factors can negatively impact child development, depending on the severity and duration (de Araújo et al., 2020). Social support, such as visits with family and friends, can mitigate the impacts of stress in the context of disasters and pandemics (Earls et al., 2008; Pfefferbaum et al., 2015), but had been inaccessible for months due to limits on social mobility.

Rationale for Playgroup at Home LIVE

Prior to lockdown, many Australian families received social support from their local playgroup: a group of children (birth-5 years) and their parents who meet regularly to play and socialize. A typical playgroup session includes story time, songs, and an activity such as a craft. Playgroups provide opportunities for parent-child engagement, a space for discussions about parenting, and the formation of social networks by parents and children alike. The benefits of playgroup can be observed for both children and their parents, and include improved school-readiness and transition to school, social supports, and parenting confidence and knowledge (Commerford & Hunter, 2017; Gregory et al., 2017).

Playgroup Victoria, the state's peak body for playgroups, recognized that families needed the benefits of playgroup arguably more than ever in lockdown. Research has demonstrated that children are reassured by the virtual presence of their parent after separation, thus video communication may be a useful tool to maintain relationships when physical presence is not possible (Tarasuik et al., 2011). With this in mind, Playgroup Victoria developed Playgroup at Home LIVE (PAHL)—remotely delivered, interactive playgroup sessions that families could participate in from their homes. PAHL provided families the opportunity to continue to "go to playgroup" by offering a consistent weekly schedule of programs. The engaging and social sessions were intentionally planned to help families overcome feelings of isolation and loneliness. Strengthening community wellbeing and connectedness are key aspects of playgroup and were thus a focus of PAHL.

Playgroup at Home LIVE Development and Implementation

When social restrictions were first implemented, two music-based primary prevention programs were adapted for remote delivery. Facilitators applied their understanding from this new and unforeseen format to develop the PAHL sessions which followed a traditional playgroup structure including story time, songs, and a group activity. Consistent with the goals of physical playgroups, PAHL development focused on cultivating positive experiences by providing opportunities for

socialization, promoting play, enhancing children's learning and development, encouraging parent-child engagement, and improving the wellbeing of both children and their parents.

In addition to an all-ages playgroup (birth to 5 years), sessions were designed for specific audiences: baby playgroup for new parents, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (or similar characteristics), and parents of children with a disability. Sessions were run by experienced playgroup facilitators who were also trained in peepLTP (Evangelou & Sylva, 2007), an evidence-based curriculum that teaches parents about how children learn—and how to implement things at home that make a difference to children's outcomes.

The initial 12-week schedule was communicated to families via Playgroup Victoria's Facebook page, website and member email, plus informal promotion from maternal child health nurses and local community organizations. Additional program components included the development of protocols concerning eSafety, booking processes, and technical assistance.

Program Evaluation

After the first 12 weeks of PAHL, families who had registered to participate (n=2,046) were invited via email to provide their feedback in an evaluation survey. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and participants could elect to enter a prize draw after survey completion. The 15-question survey asked parents about their PAHL experience and was a mix of multiple choice, ratings, and open-ended questions. Fourteen percent of participating families (n=338) completed the survey via the online survey tool, Typeform. Data was collected and treated with adherence to ethics principles, however the project protocol was not subject to an institutional ethics committee. Researchers analyzed the data using MS Excel (quantitative) and NVivo 12 (qualitative) software.

Quantitative Responses

From the quantitative multiple choice and ratings data, we particularly highlight attendance and impacts on participants.

Attendance

PAHL was the first experience of playgroup for nearly half of the families who responded to the survey (47%). During the 12 weeks, there were between 2 and 7 weekly PAHL sessions. Table 1 shows the number of sessions families attended during the first three months of PAHL and how many children participated within each family. Infants less than one year old were the most represented age group in attendance (27%) followed by children aged 2 years (21%), 1 year (13%), 3 years (16%), and 4 years (15%), and the remaining children were school-aged (5 years or older).

Table 1. Frequency of sessions attended during the first 12 weeks and number of children per household

Sessions Attended	
# of sessions	% of families
1	20
2	13
3	12
4	10
5	12
6-10	22
>10	11

Children per Household	
# of children	% of families
1	64
2	27
≥3	9

Impacts of Participation

Participants were asked to rate whether seeing other families participate had impacted themselves or their children. More than half of families (53%) indicated their child(ren) enjoyed seeing other children participating. One-third of families (34%) thought it helped their child(ren) feel like they were part of a group (34%), and seeing other children take part encouraged children to participate (31%). Parents also reported that they benefitted from the socialization of playgroup; one-third (33%) of parents felt like they were part of a group, 38% of families said that observing other families normalized the challenges of parenting and 19% enjoyed seeing other adults (amid social restrictions). Eighteen families (5%) provided additional comments such as that they mostly paid attention to the presenters rather than the other families. One of the most powerful findings, and one that supported the goals of PAHL, was that nearly all families felt that attending the sessions made them feel less socially isolated during lockdown by either a little (65%) or a lot (26%).

Many playgroups, including PAHL, provide examples of accessible activities that can be replicated at home to strengthen the parent-child relationship and build the home learning environment. Most families (96%) reported learning new activities to do with their child: 63% got a few ideas, 33% got many ideas, and less than 4% of families reported that they did not get any ideas from the sessions.

Program satisfaction was reflected by participants' willingness to recommend the program to others and re-enroll (McCurdy & Daro, 2001). Almost all families (95%) said they would participate in PAHL again. Nearly three-quarters of families (73%) had recommended PAHL to other families, 25% said they intended to do so, but 2% indicated they probably would not.

Qualitative Responses

To further understand families' experiences of PAHL, the survey included open-ended questions about what families enjoyed most about PAHL and suggestions for improvement.

What Families Enjoyed Most

Several key themes emerged from asking families what they enjoyed most about PAHL: the activities, learning by parent or child, opportunities to interact and see others, the facilitators, and the routine PAHL offered during uncertain times. Figure 2 illustrates the frequency of words used to describe what families enjoyed most about the program.

Figure 2. Word frequency of what families enjoyed most about PAHL

Note. More frequent words appear larger.

Nearly all respondents (91%) mentioned that their family enjoyed the activities offered. Singing (29%), storytelling (12%) and dancing (12%) were among the favorite activities. Some parents (17%) specifically mentioned that they enjoyed learning new ideas or activities to try at home, e.g., "The activities in playgroup encourage children to learn more and enhance my child's creativity as well as mine as their [sic] is a lot to learn." Children learning from the PAHL session was also mentioned (3%), e.g., a parent enjoyed "being able to see my son learning new things and interact with others." These findings align with what is known to occur at playgroup, and consistent with research demonstrating children develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills through play (Singer et al., 2006).

Providing social connection and a sense of community are inherent to playgroups and were included in the goals of PAHL. Many families (n=62) mentioned that being able to interact with others or simply seeing other families was one of the things they enjoyed most about PAHL, providing further promise of its social benefits for

participants. One parent said, "The community feel, activity ideas and it's fun!" Another parent responded they enjoyed the "dancing and socializing. Seeing the children smiling and socializing during a difficult time." One participant remarked, "The interaction and ideas for entertaining the kids we get from Playgroup sessions make lockdown a little bit easier and gives us a chance to socialize from home." Given that physical playgroup has been shown to impact families' feelings of community and sense of social support, including feeling less isolated (Hancock et al., 2015; Strange et al., 2014), it was encouraging to have social benefits reported from the online engagement.

Thirteen families praised the presenters for their enthusiasm and engaging the children, e.g., one parent enjoyed "The presenters—they're so engaging. They personalize it too by calling out the kids names and my little one LOVES it when he hears his name being called." Twelve families mentioned they enjoyed the structure or routine it brought, e.g., "Having a regular time to attend an activity feels normal"; "We LOVED having something structured to do at a certain time each week."

Suggestions for Improvement

When asked whether they had any suggestions to improve the PAHL program, almost half (46%) either had nothing to add or reiterated positive perceptions of the program:

> *I think given it's very tricky to engage a large group of children in an online platform, the playgroup sessions are fantastic! My children love hearing their names called out too! I'm sure this type of learning is new for most of us, but the program is high quality and makes my boys feel better about life in lockdown. Thank you to all involved.*
>
> *Love it as is.*
>
> *I think they've been really well put together and engaging for the children.*

The suggestions for improvement were less consistent than what families enjoyed most about the program, but included changes to content, more opportunities for social interaction, and the schedule (e.g., more sessions). While not a large representation, three families mentioned it would be great for more men to participate in the sessions as facilitators or caregivers, e.g., "It is a great session. I think it is really good for dads too. My husband has gained a lot from it. I was also thinking that virtual playgroups could be a great way to get dads involved post-COVID. Congratulations!"

Consistent with what families reported enjoying most about PAHL, many requested more time be dedicated to singing and storytelling. There were some suggestions for PAHL to be offered in various languages, and/or to utilize the sessions as an opportunity for cultural awareness/ education:

> *Since there are many different cultures participating in the playgroup community, maybe consider an international component? Sing an indigenous song, tell a cultural story, learn how to count in a different language? It would be great to teach our children about different cultures from an early age.*

A few families suggested more age-appropriate activities for specific ages, specifically young infants and younger toddlers who were considered outside the developmental stages that the Baby or All-Ages PAHL sessions targeted. There were also comments related to the materials needed for the activities. Although activities generally utilized materials often found in the home, some families noted that it was difficult to source what was not in their home during lockdown. A few parents mentioned that PAHL could include some outdoor activities during the warmer weather.

Given that social interaction was reported to be a favorite aspect of PAHL, it was unsurprising that more opportunities to interact with others was suggested. Parents also remarked how much their child enjoyed hearing their name called and wanted there to be more of this. To improve the social component of PAHL, families suggested breakout rooms or limiting attendance to smaller numbers. While breakout rooms are not within the capacity of the program nor the current PAHL design, parents who have participated in various sized sessions have commented on the enhanced interactivity in the smaller sessions. A potential solution to this would be to cap session enrollment, but we acknowledge the challenge this presents and depends on having more facilitators to maintain inclusive participation.

Reflecting on session enjoyment, nine families requested longer sessions. Consistent with parents' recommendation for more age-appropriate activities, some families suggested introducing more age-specific sessions. There were requests for more sessions per day to accommodate for different schedules, particularly pertinent for children who nap at inconsistent times.

There were some requests (n=16) for sessions to be recorded and available to watch later, which could not be fulfilled for privacy reasons. Although watching a recording might offer the benefits of activity ideas for families to try at home, there were already sufficient non-interactive idea offerings available for families. Additionally, the theoretical basis for PAHL is grounded in research that suggests video chat can help maintain social connections in the absence of face-to-face interactions (McClure & Barr, 2016; Tarasuik et al., 2011). It is less likely that watching a recording, void of the social interaction afforded by video chat, would yield similar results of social connection.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Playgroup at Home LIVE appeared to help maintain a routine for many families throughout lockdown and provided activities, ideas, and socialization for children and adults alike. The survey responses indicated that the online delivery of playgroup provided some of the benefits known to occur at in-person sessions,

most notably, social support. Nearly all families reported the sessions made them feel less socially isolated during lockdown, and that they appreciated the ideas for activities to do with their child. By providing a semblance of routine and social connection to families, as well as activities and play opportunities, PAHL may have buffered some of the COVID-19 distress for many families.

The survey findings of PAHL demonstrate that we can remove the physical barrier of playgroup attendance while maintaining program satisfaction and similar benefits. Just as telehealth has removed barriers and improved access to healthcare, PAHL can do the same with playgroups. All children have the right to participate, and personal mobility, immunity, time and financial challenges associated with physically attending should not prevent them from being part of the playgroup community. PAHL has great potential beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, and future efforts should focus on reaching families facing a variety of barriers.

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