

Multilingual playgroups: Playgroups with a Plus

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Multilingual playgroups are nothing new. This is a country where many languages have always been spoken. According to the 2011 census, over 300 languages are spoken in Australian households, by almost one in five of Australian residents, either exclusively or together with English.

However, this rich language resource may not be acknowledged or much discussed in many playgroups. Other languages can be seen as a bit of barrier or an impediment to be overcome. Nevertheless, an increasing number of playgroups are being established specifically to promote languages other than English. This article looks at some of these in Canberra and how they enrich the lives of the families who attend.

The major aim of these playgroups is to promote the use of the language they focus on (see list at the end of the article) and knowledge and understanding of the accompanying culture or cultures. As the French playgroup 'Les Petites Etoiles' states on its website, the goal is "to promote and instil a love of the French language and culture in young children". This is achieved by using the target language as much as possible during the usual activities of a playgroup – singing, reading and telling stories, playing games and doing craft activities. The adults are encouraged to use the target language as much as possible with each other and in their interactions with the children.

These language playgroups have much in common with other community-based playgroups. They are not-for-profit, are run by the people who attend them, and have multiple benefits for both children and their carers. However, they offer an extra dimension; one that many parents think will be of immense value to their children in their future lives. The playgroups also play a special role in the lives of families, as will be discussed below.

Family connections, cultural understandings

In most of the playgroups, the majority of parents who attend have a family connection with the target language. Whether they were born in Australia or overseas, they grew up in families where their mother, father and/or grandparents spoke the language. They thus consider it an important part of their heritage, and want to pass it on to their children. They believe that understanding the target language and the cultural values it expresses is an important part of who they are and who their children are.

A language playgroup helps parents pass on this heritage. It brings together families who might otherwise not be in touch with each other and provides an environment where it is natural to speak the target language. This is very important in a society like ours where the English language is so dominant. The playgroup shows children that many people speak the target language. Their family is not odd or alone.

As Pablo, the convenor of the 'Ositos de Chocolate' Spanish playgroup said it "provides a forum where kids are exposed to Spanish outside the home". This playgroup, which meets on Saturday mornings, is attended by many dads, mostly from South American countries. Where only one parent in the family speaks the target language, English may be the language of the home so the linguistic environment of the playgroup is even more important. In addition, the parent with a family link to the language may not be a very fluent speaker. Perhaps they have not spoken it since they were young, or they just have a passive knowledge of it as they were not encouraged to, and/or did not want to, use the

language when they were growing up. This was the case with two of the second generation German parents at 'Spiel and Spass'.

By linking fluent speakers, perhaps recently arrived from overseas, with such parents, the language playgroups help revive and develop the target language and with it, sense of identity, among parents as well as children.

The Polish playgroup Krasnoludki is another good example of how a playgroup can bring together first and second generation migrants. Established in 2010, the playgroup aims to expose youngsters to the Polish language, culture and traditions. The group has a membership of about 50 families and dominates the Polish Australian White Eagle Club in Canberra on its meetings on Saturday afternoons, taking over two rooms – one for babies and toddlers and another for older children.

In addition to their role in relation to heritage and identity, language playgroups have a very practical function. They help facilitate understanding within the family. Communicating with mother-in-laws and grandparents was mentioned by more than one of the members of language playgroups I spoke to.

Children's educational and cognitive development

Not all the families who attend language playgroups have a family or heritage connection with the target language. This is particularly so with 'Les Petites Etoiles' and the 'Mandarin for Fun' playgroup. A number of the parents who attend the former, which meets on Monday mornings, learned French at school or university and/or have lived and travelled in France. They wish to keep up their language skills and also pass them on to their children. At the 'Mandarin for Fun' playgroup, only a minority of the parents speak Chinese. In fact, one of the aims of this group is to teach both children and carers the languages so that they can practice at home together. According to Lucia, the coordinator, most parents attend because they think Mandarin will be an important language for the future.

There is also an awareness among parents of the general educational and cognitive benefits of exposing children to more than one language at a young age. As one parent at the 'Spiel and Spass' group told me, "it expands their ways of thinking and makes connections in the brain".

A growing body of research supports these ideas. Studies indicate that using two languages helps children develop attention skills and the ability to look at things from more than one angle. Exposure to more than one language also makes it easier for children to understand the nature of language itself, which can help with learning to read and write. Knowing another language can also promote intercultural understanding and make learning additional languages easier.

It is useful for parents to be aware of such research to give them the confidence to continue to encourage their children to become proficient in more than one language, especially after they start school. Some teachers still think that speaking another language will interfere with the development of English language skills and may advise parents not to speak another language at home. This not only flies in the face of research but ignores the fact that the majority of children in the world are brought up with two or more languages as a matter of course. Many parents who attend language playgroups know this from personal experience. For example, Pablo from Ositos grew up in Argentina speaking both Polish and Spanish.

Social contact and networks

Like other playgroups, language-focussed playgroups are also enjoyable social occasions for parents. This was clearly shown by the parents who attend the Spanish playgroup, who were unwilling to stop meeting just because it was school holidays. They just moved elsewhere when the hall they usually used was unavailable. The opportunity for social

interaction outside the home can be especially important for parents who are not in the workforce, like the attendee at 'Spiel and Spass' who described herself as a "stay-at-home mum".

Playgroups are also places to discuss concerns and share information. This can be especially useful for new parents and for people new to Canberra. As Valerie, a qualified teacher who organises activities at the French playgroup said "when I arrived with an eight-month old I knew no one. It was a good way to meet others".

For parents who are more comfortable and confident using a language other than English, finding a group where their language is spoken can be a great boon. This is particularly important for new arrivals from overseas. Hannah from the Yeppeun Byol Playgroup said that the group was often "the first point of contact" for parents from Korea. Sky mentioned the role of 'Les Petites Etoiles' in providing local knowledge and support for recent migrants and diplomatic families posted to Australia. The Polish group also noted that two new families had recently come from overseas, though not necessarily directly from Poland. Several Polish-speaking families had emigrated from other countries like Canada or the UK.

Social activities and the chance to expose children to other languages in a fun way are also extended by organising trips and excursions. For example, the Spanish playgroup organised a camping trip in spring 2012. Twenty-eight children went along, all but a handful under school age. The Polish playgroup arranges many excursions, such as to a farm, to Questacon, to the coast and to go ice skating. Individual families may also organise get-togethers or play dates outside the playgroup.

Language-focussed playgroups therefore facilitate social contact between families with a common interest in other languages and cultures. This increases the exposure of children to the target language, with consequent social, personal and cognitive benefits.

Playgroups with a Plus

Language playgroups can therefore be seen as 'Playgroups with a Plus'. They add an extra dimension to the important role that playgroups play for families in Australia. By taking advantage of the rich diversity within Australian society, they reinforce identities and help children develop their skills to live harmoniously with others. They also prepare children for an increasingly interconnected world where communication across languages and cultures will be an essential skill, and knowing English and at least one other language will be the norm.

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