



Our Theory of Change

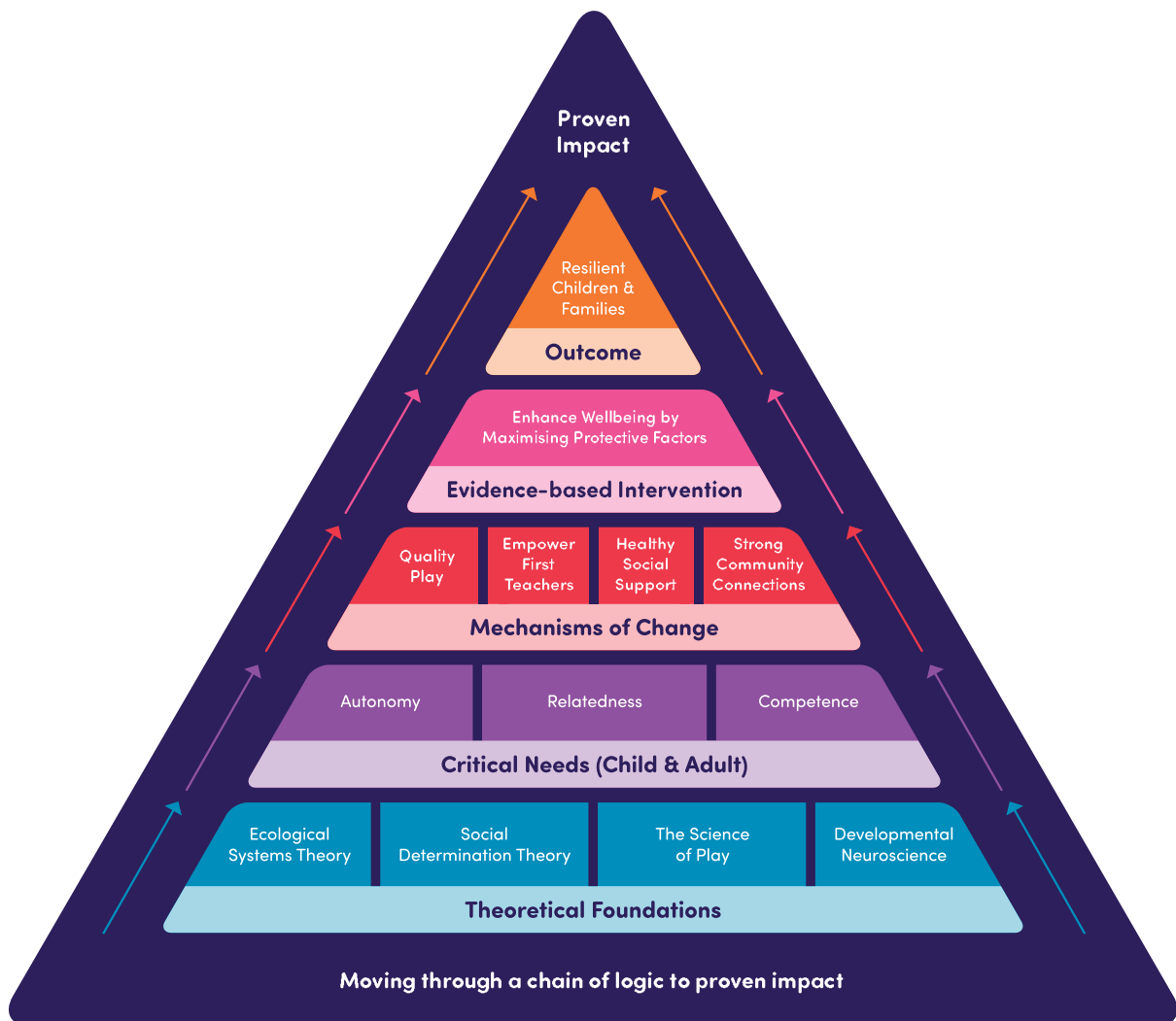
Play Matters Australia

play
matters
the heart & science of play

Play Matters Theory of Change

A 'theory of change' is used to explain why programs and activities are expected to produce impacts required to achieve the ultimate intended outcomes. The Play Matters Australia Theory of Change consists of a logical chain of evidence that leads from theories proven through science (developmental neuroscience and the science of play), experimentation (social determination theory), and long recognition and usage (ecological systems theory). This provides a strong foundation to develop evidence informed 'mechanisms of change' that are embedded in any proposed interventions to optimise the likelihood of activities delivering measurable outcomes.

The Play Matters Australia Theory of Change Diagram:



Theoretical Foundations Pyramid Step

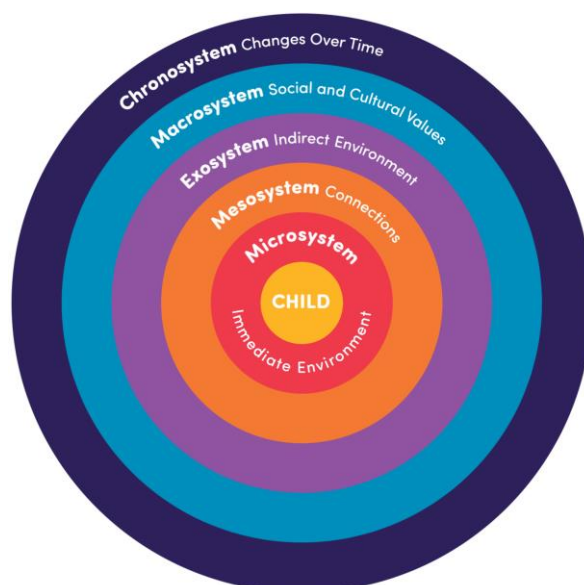


Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget (1896-1980), was the first to make a systematic study of the acquisition of understanding in children. Unlike earlier researchers, who primarily considered children as small versions of adults, Piaget argued that childhood is a unique and important period of human development. Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development (Wadsworth 1971) with its 4 stages of development has been highly influential.

However, Piaget himself said, "Scientific knowledge is in perpetual evolution; it finds itself changed from one day to the next." Piaget's stages of development were quite narrow, rigidly chronological, and dependent on a European cultural context. Other theorists built on the work of Piaget, but also identified the need to not only focus on a child's capacity to learn but on the social and cultural context of the child. We have chosen to focus on Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) as the best example of considering the context of a child's cognitive development. One of the core insights of Bronfenbrenner's **Ecological Systems Theory** (Bronfenbrenner 2005) is that child development does not take place universally, but rather occurs as a complex interaction of a child's biology and psychology with the influences of family, neighbourhood, school, community, culture, and society. Bronfenbrenner also owed a debt to Lev Vygotsky's theories (1896-1934) that stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition.

Vygotsky (1978), a contemporary of Piaget, believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of a child "making meaning." Bronfenbrenner's ecological model highlighted the importance of changing the environment in which children grow up rather than only focusing on the characteristics of any individual child.

Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory



Later in his career, Bronfenbrenner developed a bioecological model of development as an extension of his original theoretical model of human development. The bioecological model of development, first proposed in 1994, considers the process of gene–environment interactions in human development. In the bioecological model, development is defined as “the phenomenon of continuity and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings, both as individuals and as groups. The phenomenon extends over the life course, across successive generations, and through historical time, both past and future” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris 2006).

This broadening over time of the factors involved in child development established a branch of science called Developmental Science as an interdisciplinary scientific field that synthesizes perspectives from biology, psychology, and sociology to better understand the complexity of human development. It also considers social and emotional development as well as cognitive development. Advances in scientific knowledge in areas such as genetics, neuroscience, and evolutionary biology has aided contemporary theorists to identify the biological processes that underpin the psychological and behavioural observations of earlier theorists.

Developmental Neuroscience is constantly evolving and shining a light on the influence of protective and risk factors on the life trajectory of the child through directly and indirectly impacting the structure and function of the child’s brain. Life Trajectory refers to either the either generally positive or generally negative direction of an individual’s life course. The developmental status at any given time can be described using the formula: $D_t = f(t-p) (PE) (t-p)$. The developmental outcome/status (D), observed at a point in time (t) is a function (f) of the interaction between the characteristics of the person (P) and the characteristics of the environment (E) in the period (p) leading up to the time of observation (t-p) (Legge 2018).

Developmental Neuroscience has also identified the neurological impacts of trauma, poverty, and disadvantage, which have long been observed to undermine a child’s successful development, and that those delays can have a lifelong impact. Factors such as income, education, employment, power, and social support act to strengthen or undermine the health of individuals and communities. With the right support however, children can and do recover from experiences of trauma and adversity. According to Perry (2006), “a child exposed to consistent, predictable, nurturing, and enriched experiences will develop neurobiological capabilities that will increase the child’s chance for health, happiness, productivity and creativity” (p.36). Therefore, a vital part of recovery for children who have experienced trauma is to build a secure attachment relationship with a parent or caregiver (Lyons, n.d.; Perry, 2006).

Furthermore, healthy brain development in children is shaped by the continuous ‘serve and return’ interaction (Centre on the Developing Child 2014) between adult-child relationship, and this lays the foundation for later outcomes. Play Matters Australia delivers programs and interventions, such as playgroups, and therapeutic interventions such as Sing&Grow, that aim to support and develop the relationship between parent/carer and child and provide opportunities to engage in these important ‘serve and return’ interactions. Providing opportunities for parents and children can therefore serve to ameliorate the adverse influence of developmental risk factors. Furthermore, this helps to build parent’s confidence, knowledge and skills for them to grow into their roles as their child’s ‘first teacher’ (Council of Australian Governments (COAG) 2009).



New knowledge in neuroscience has led to the contemporary focus on the first 1,000 days of a child's life (Moore 2017). These advances in knowledge have led to equal emphasis being placed on the development of scientific tools for research and experimentation as on the development of theoretical models.

Self Determination Theory (SDT) is an umbrella theory that grew out of the work of researchers Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan on motivation in the 1970s and 1980s. It has grown and expanded since then, based on significant ongoing research. In 2017, Deci and Ryan published an updated account of the research and experimentation that had been undertaken on self-determination since their original work was published in 1985 (Deci & Ryan 2017). Self Determination Theory is based on a wide and deep body of evidence.

SDT focuses on the circumstances under which children's development optimally proceeds, given their intrinsic drive to take interest in, learn about, and gain mastery with respect to their inner and outer worlds. When afforded a "good enough" (basic need supporting) environment, children will innately move toward thriving, wellness, and integrity. However, this natural tendency towards growth and development is conditional on social and environmental support to satisfy basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Social and environmental experiences can either build or undermine resilience and healthy development.

Environments that support intrinsic motivation and true self-esteem are critical. True self-esteem is the product of an environment that supports basic needs. It is derived from an intrinsic sense of self-worth and leads to a child who is aware of their unconditional worth, experiences themselves as an authentic self, experiences a stable self-esteem and resilient identity. As adults they are focused on intrinsic aspirations – personal growth, meaningful relationships, and community involvement. Intrinsically motivated behaviours are performed out of interest, with "effectance" (influencing objects and environment) and enjoyment being the primary rewards. Alternatively, extrinsically motivated behaviours seek to receive an external reward such as social approval or avoidance of punishment. This results in contingent self-esteem, which tends to be unstable and fragile. As adults they are focused on extrinsic aspirations – wealth, fame, image, and social comparison-based success. It is a product of basic-need-thwarting environments.

The Science of Play

Play is critical to healthy child development. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) famously said, "Play is the work of childhood". Intrinsic motivation is critical to the definition of children's play. Dr. Peter Gray (2013) concluded that the descriptors of human play used by prominent play scholars had five elements in common:

- Play Is Self-Chosen and Self-Directed
- Play is intrinsically motivated - means are more valued than ends.
- Play is guided by mental rules, but the rules leave room for creativity.
- Play is imaginative.
- Play is conducted in an alert, active, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind.

Another critical element of play in all definitions is that the activity is undertaken for enjoyment:

- Engage in activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose (Oxford English Dictionary)
- When you play, especially as a child, you spend time doing an enjoyable and/or entertaining activity (Cambridge Dictionary)
- Activities that are done especially by children for fun or enjoyment (Merriam Webster Dictionary)
- When children, animals, or perhaps adults play, they spend time doing enjoyable things, such as using toys and taking part in games (Collins English Dictionary)

Thanks to our advancing understanding of the brain development of the human child, the criticality of freely chosen play to healthy development is now universally recognised. The United Nations has included the right to play as a fundamental right of the child. Play is universal; however, how it looks differs between cultures (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2013). Suppositions that play in children and young animals was simply practicing adult behaviours have now been disproved through advances in neuroscience.

Learning through play is different to being taught. The act of play works directly on brain flexibility and adaptability. Play impacts cognitive, emotional, and social development. These propensities are active in both children and adults (Ryan & Deci 2017). There are many types of play related to both age-appropriate pedagogies and contextual expressions. All play is not the same.

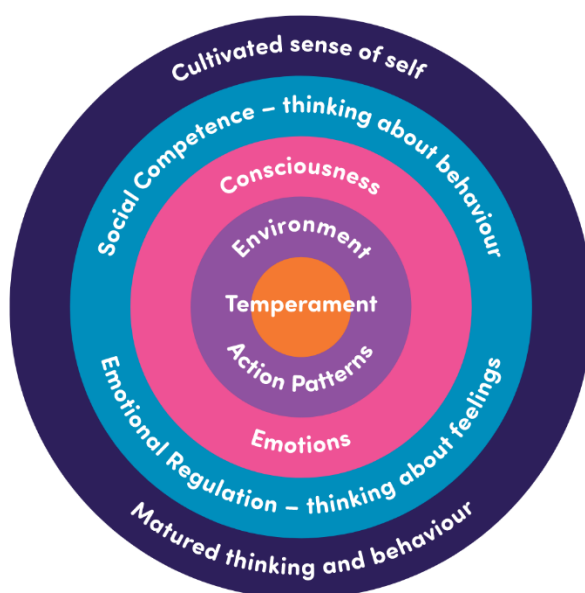


Figure 2: The biological, psychological, and social journey from the inherited temperament of the newborn to the social, emotional, and cognitive maturity of the adult

Critical Needs (Child and Adult) Pyramid Step



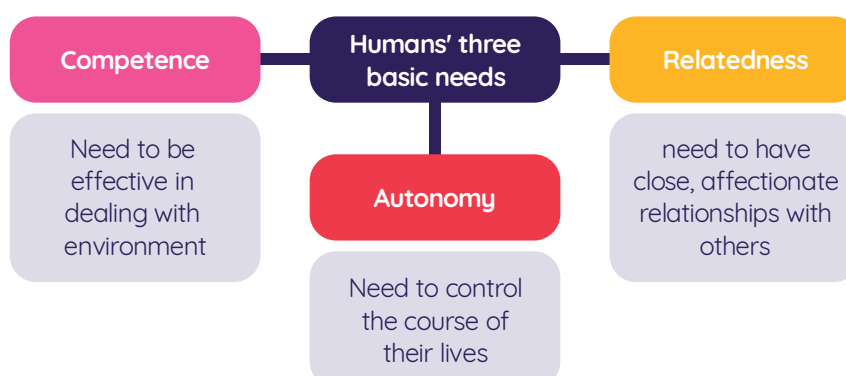
Autonomy, relatedness, and competence are terms used by Ryan & Deci (2017); however, the concept that children need to experience a balance between expressing their autonomy, experiencing positive connection to others, and demonstrating their ability to act on their environment is common across many models. In particular, the idea of balance across these capabilities is central to the parenting practices of global Indigenous communities (Doucleff 2021 p.108).

This trio of basic psychological needs is also central to the Australian Early Years Learning Framework's concepts of Belonging, Being, and Becoming (Council of Australian Governments (COAG) 2009):

- Belonging - knowing where and with whom you belong (relatedness)
- Being - knowing themselves (autonomy)
- Becoming – learning and growing in knowledge, capacities, skills, identity, and relationships during childhood (competence)

When environments are deficient and social contexts frustrate autonomy, relatedness, or competence, developmental costs include defensive and compensatory strategies making individuals self-focused, defensive, amotivated, aggressive, or anti-social. For example:

- The hallmark of autonomy is that one's behaviours are congruent with one's authentic interests and values. Perfectionist children experience a loss of autonomy in the battle for love via competence to maintain relatedness.
- Competence is a basic need to feel effectance and mastery that can be undermined by challenges that are too difficult or criticism that is negative and harsh and questions personal worth.
- Relatedness is a basic need to be cared for, but also to feel significant among others by contributing to social groups, and a sense of belonging by being accepted by others. This can be a significant point of conflict for people from different cultural backgrounds when home and community look and feel very different from social institutions.



Autonomy is critical to the development of intrinsic motivation and a strong internal sense of authenticity. It is central to the process of being and to developing a stable sense of self even though people have multiple personal, cultural, and social identities. The way that the individual internalises these multiple identities is directly linked to the dynamics of self-esteem. Identities are formed under the dual influence of individual diversities and cultural norms creating belonging but also fragmentation. Greater internalisation leads to greater authenticity and greater well-being. Experience is critical to growth and both children and parents need to have experiences that nurture autonomy, relatedness, and competence. Understanding identity formation and internalisation is critical to better engagement with culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Social Determination Theory charmingly calls the striving to develop authentic values, goals, and interests as the formation of an “inner compass”. A clear and authentic inner compass provides the guidance system for healthy decision-making and a foundation for experiencing actions and decisions as coherent and meaningful. Influencing playgroups to be a great space for parent and child to understand and nurture this inner compass by bringing together parents, volunteers, community, and experts come together to support families. Championing ‘agency’ and ‘choice’ for both children and adults is critical to promoting healthy and resilient children and families.

Key Mechanisms of Change Pyramid Step



The four major mechanisms that we have defined as being crucial to delivering on the need for adults and children to experience a balance of autonomy, relatedness, and competence are:

- **Quality play**
- **Empower First Teachers**
- **Healthy social support**
- **Strong community connections**

A vision of children as active learners, who acquire knowledge by examining and exploring their environment through play is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Committee on the Rights of the Child 2013). The importance of children learning through play is now very much a mainstream concept. The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (COAG 2009) emphasises the importance of play-based learning as a context for learning that:

- allows for the expression of personality and uniqueness
- enhances dispositions such as curiosity and creativity
- enables children to make connections between prior experiences and new learning
- assists children to develop relationships and concepts
- stimulates a sense of wellbeing.

It also recognises that “families are children’s first and most influential teachers (COAG 2009, p.10).”

Play can be unstructured and structured, and both are essential for healthy development. Unstructured play builds skills in exploration, experimentation, and imagination; interpersonal negotiation and self-management; and problem-solving and decision-making. Structured play provides a role for a child’s parent/carer to extend the challenge of child-led play (Flückiger B et al 2015). The playgroup model of children and parents playing together is the perfect environment for the transfer of practical knowledge and skills to parents to enable them to “scaffold” their children’s play to maximise the developmental opportunities.

An extensive body of literature exists about the different types of play and their impact on child development. Dramatic play, physical play, and constructive play all contribute to fine motor skills, hand-eye co-ordination, language skills, social skills, cooperation, taking turns, and problem solving. Above all, play should be intrinsically motivated and pleasurable.

Types of Play

There are many ways to dissect the meaning of play and as many classifications of different types of play. A useful initial broad breakdown is that used by Dr. Stuart Brown, founder of the US National Institute for Play (Brown S 2013):

- Attunement Play
- Body Play
- Object Play
- Social Play
- Imaginative and Pretend Play
- Storytelling Play
- Creative Play

Attunement play, body play, and object play are particularly important for infants. Attunement play is the early building block for all forms of play. It establishes an emotional connection between the mother and newborn and later with other carers through activities like peek-a-boo and baby talk. Body play is how an infant explores how their body works and interacts with the environment around them. Object play is how older babies begin to play with toys and handle everyday items impelled by curiosity.

Social play is one of the most complex forms of play because it involves others and requires interpersonal negotiation. Social play helps children establish social norms and develop the interpersonal skills that will help them have successful friendships and relationships. Whether it’s done with others or alone, imaginative and pretend play allows children to develop scenarios of their own whether from real life or within a pretend world. They are developing their own inner story and an understanding of their place in the world.

Storytelling play is where children learn to develop a coherent narrative from these vignettes of scenes from life or imagination. It is often stimulated when adults read to them or tell them stories. Children also love it when parents tell them stories that form part of their origin story such as when they first smiled or from when they were born. Storytelling is an embedded human trait.

Creative play allows children to transcend reality and the moment to think new thoughts about what could be and to develop new ways of seeing and being. It builds on the thoughts and ideas that are developed during imaginative and pretend play allowing children to play out finished ideas that add function and progress to their lives.

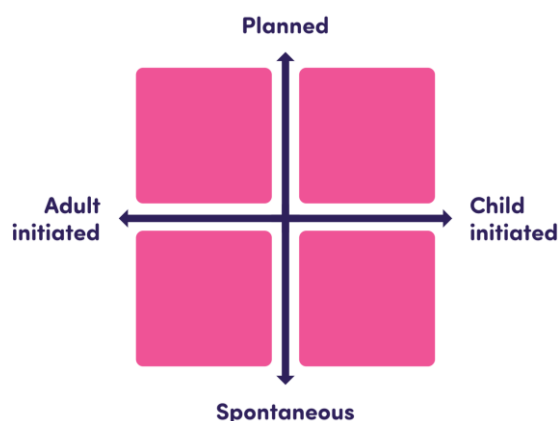
Attunement play, body play, object play and social play are closely aligned to play observed in animals described as object play, locomotor play and social play, again building body and spatial awareness, dexterity and cognitive ability, and social skills. Other categorisations of play are more focused on human motivations such as Parten's six categories of play (Robinson C et al 2018):

- Unoccupied play – infants and toddlers exploring materials around them in an unorganised fashion
- Solitary play – a child pursuing their own activity without reference to the activity of others
- Onlooker/spectator play – a child observing another child or children at play. It is an important stage of play and the child may become a participant if interested or comfortable.
- Parallel play – a child playing near or alongside other children playing without interacting. Again it may be a precursor to more social types of play.
- Associative play – children playing together without coordinating play objectives or sharing an overall plan for the play.
- Cooperative play – children engaging in play that has a shared goal where the children communicate about the play and organise themselves into roles.

There are many different types of play within these categories and children can be involved in multiple types of play in any single play session.

“Children need to be involved in more than one type of play to fully develop the brain and body. Play with small items helps to improve fine control of small muscles, while whole-body play builds large muscles and bones. Building or creating something using natural or manufactured materials (construction play) provides an opportunity to practice cognitive skills and work on fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination and basic engineering skills (Robinson C et al 2018 p14).”

Figure 11: Framework for the balance of pedagogical approaches (Flückiger et al 2015)



Research has shown that adults as well as children learn best in concrete, interactive, hands-on situations. Playgroups showcase the role of play, of children and adults learning together, and of children and adults learning through hands-on experience.



These essential characteristics of playgroups and play-based programs make them unique in the Early Years Landscape and very different to formal learning and care situations or to parenting classes and courses.

Empower First Teachers

For almost 50 years our charity has uniquely recognised the importance of parents and carers as their child's first teacher. The importance of enhancing the quality of parent-child relationships and the caregivers' capabilities and confidence is a foundational element within the design and delivery of our programs.

This key parent/carer-child relationship is also a fundamental pillar of Australia's National Early Years Framework (COAG 2009). This National Framework states that "from before birth children are connected to family, community, culture and place" and that children's "earliest development and learning takes place through these relationships, particularly within families, who are children's first and most influential educators" (COAG 2009).

The importance of the role of first teachers is also called out in the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy (NIAA 2021). Adjunct Professor Muriel Bamblett, AO Chair, SNAICC – National Voice for Our Children is clear in stating the need "to recognise the strengths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families" and "seek to empower parents and kin as the first teachers and primary carers for their children" (NIAA 2021). Play Matters Australia is committed to supporting self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families, and communities and our Reconciliation Action Plan seeks to reiterate this critical element of empowering parents, carers and kin as important first teachers (2022).

The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper (Moore, Deery, West, 2017) produced by the Centre of Community and Child Health identifies evolving ideas and theories around the critical and sensitive periods of child development and the extent of a child's neuroplasticity and sensitivity during this time. The paper explores the interplay of neurobiology and interpersonal relationships at the start of life, in addition to examining the importance of the parent-child attachment and impact of parenting styles on children. The paper asserts that parenting style and parent-child relationship in the first 1000 days can impact a child's health and wellbeing outcomes in later life.



Nurturing Care Framework Domains: (WHO, UNICEF, World Bank Group 2018)

Influenced by the evidence in the Lancet series Advancing early childhood development: from science to scale (Lancet 2017), the World Health Organisation, UNICEF and the World Bank Group launched the Nurturing Care Framework (2018) for early childhood development (ECD) to a global audience. The Framework presents a roadmap for action and focuses on children, parents and caregivers in the period from pregnancy to age three within a life course approach. It outlines a range of evidence-based, actionable domains for policy makers to implement to achieve population-level impact to improve ECD outcomes. The framework states children do not start to learn only when they begin kindergarten or pre-primary, rather, learning begins at conception and is enhanced by affectionate caregiving, communication that is language-rich, age-appropriate play and a nurturing family environment. WHO (2020) further developed practical guidelines for policy makers, with 'Responsive caregiving and Early opportunities for learning' including age-appropriate play, as one of the nine critical domains to achieve impact.

The ECD policy arena is a developing field, with growing evidence of certainty about interventions that encourage and promote sensitivity and responsiveness of the caregiver to their child, including integrating play and communication to enhance a child's health, growth and development (WHO, 2020). These global recommendations align to the importance that **Play Matters Australia** places on interventions that empower and enhance the capabilities and confidence of parents as their child's first teacher and on the caregiver-child relationship.

Healthy Social Support

All Play Matters Australia programs work with both parents/carers and children. As well as quality play, our focus is on building opportunities for healthy social support and empowering parents and carers as their child's first teachers. These are the building blocks for resilient families, children, and communities. Evidence is growing that taking a multi-generational approach, which assists parents and their children together in a more holistic way, can be more effective than working on specific aspects of the child's experience in isolation to improve their life chances (House of Representatives Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence 2019). Parents/carers and children gathering together to share and interact in playgroups and other settings centred around play creates an environment for mutual support and sharing. These groupings can no longer be taken for granted as part of everyday life for parents/carers and children in our increasingly fragmented society based on the nuclear family unit. Families are so often separated from their broader family by increasing geographic mobility and increasing isolation in their neighbourhoods as informal connection is harder to find with more parents/carers working full-time or a long commute away from their work. These moments of connection increasingly need to be pre-arranged or reliant on local events. Playgroups play an important part in restoring the village that humans have always relied on to raise healthy and happy families.

Strong Community Connections

Connection with community is an innate human need. We need to have our voices heard, to contribute, to find a sense of belonging and to find new forms of support outside of family and friends through community-based services and activities. "Parents attending playgroup with their children report reduced social isolation, improved parenting skills and self-confidence, increased knowledge of relevant community services, and a greater awareness of their child's needs" (Gregory et al 2016, p.6). Playgroups play an important role in the early childhood continuum of

care with their connections to maternal and child health services, other forms of pre-school care, and the formal education system. They contribute to building supportive and inclusive communities and connected and sustainable local networks. McShane et al (2016) found that “playgroups nurtured the creation of an environment where parents could find support and trust. The broad range of support that could be found in the playgroup setting often helped counter feelings of isolation experienced by new parents”. Creating trust is necessary to social learning through engaging with other parents/carers but also by helping to address misinformation or a lack of information about parenting support or other services. Playgroups assist other services to find, engage and deliver timely information to families most in need. “The view that playgroup was a safe and trusting space that allowed you to relax and seek help was consistent in the interviews”.

Social trust is a key element of community capacity building. It encourages cooperation, reciprocity and fosters knowledge sharing. McShane et al (2016) uses data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) to show that playgroup participation is an important predictor of social trust. McShane et al (2016) found that playgroups operate on an individual level by building participant skills, but also on a networking level by creating positive community relations. This networking role is often described as helping to build social capital in communities. Playgroups are social institutions that serve to anchor social networks.

A social anchor enhances or constructs a sense of community, trust, or reciprocation within social networks. “Social anchoring occurs as people in the community are able to spend time interacting, discussing, or participating in an activity that will encourage trust and relationship building—mostly through the development of an overarching group identity fostered by a social anchor” Clopton & Finch (2011). This role of providing a context of social interaction on which to sustain social networks depends heavily on face-to-face interaction over time, because “social networks are not free floating; they are bounded by space and time” Clopton & Finch (2011). In filling these roles, for participants and families, of increasing their support networks within the community and improving their participation in community life, playgroups also contribute to building stronger and more resilient communities.

Evidence Based Intervention Pyramid Step



Risk and protective factors are the characteristics and experiences of a person or a group or aspects of their environment that make it more likely, in the case of risk factors, or less likely, in the case of protective factors, that they will experience a given problem or achieve a desired outcome. Risk factors can be ameliorated by encouraging protective factors that either reduce the incidence or the impact of risks or build individual, family, and community resilience in the face of those risks. The life trajectory of individuals can be influenced at any time in their lives, particularly during times of transition; however, intervention is more successful the earlier it is done. The birth of a child is a critical transition time when the trajectory of the child, parents, and family might be effectively influenced through the same intervention.

There are many risk factors, and some are preventable, and some are not. The death of a parent or a failure of attachment with a parent is a significant risk factor; however, the presence of even one affirming adult in a child's life can make a difference. Unfortunately, the most significant risk factor – poverty – is a social problem not a terrible one-off event.

During the first three years of life, a child's brain grows from 25 per cent to 80-90 per cent of adult size. A prolonged experience of poverty in the first 1000 days has been shown to adversely impact health and wellbeing outcomes over an entire lifespan. Even before birth, the child's genetic makeup and physical, mental, and emotional development can be influenced by its prenatal environment, which is determined by the health and wellbeing of the mother and the quality of her environment (Moore et al 2017).

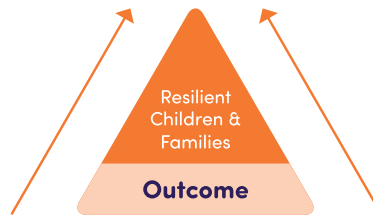
Poverty has an extremely debilitating impact on both parental and child wellbeing. Poverty adversely impacts parents' health, including mental health; relationships, especially with their children; ability to participate socially, including their ability to improve their situation through education, participation in groups, or engagement with services. It also means that children are more likely to be exposed to ongoing toxic stress caused by homelessness, domestic violence, and reduced parental responsiveness, which can impact the developing brain and hormonal systems, with lifelong consequences. A child's experience of family poverty can result in chronic stress, which adversely affects the developing brain, as well as limiting caregivers' abilities to provide supportive carer-child interactions. The term, "intergenerational trauma" describes the process by which the damage wrought by childhood adversity can be passed from generation to generation (Moore et al 2017).

For parents/carers, protective factors such as concrete support in times of need; competence in relationships, understanding both parental skills and having connections to a larger community or network can all potentially mitigate against some of the risk factors facing the family. For young children, the quality of their attachment to their primary caregiver is the most powerful determinant of their future health and wellbeing. The family environment is likewise critical to enhancing or diminishing a child's capacity for resilience. Children who are loved and safe are resilient and can withstand the challenges that life throws at them. Their capacity to achieve developmental milestones in the context of adversity is described as resilience. Moore et al (2017) say that "promoting 'optimal conditions' in early life is the best hope we have of hardwiring 'healthy' physiological, structural, immune and metabolic and behavioural responses".

Play Matters Australia delivers a number of programs that serve to develop, nurture and build upon several protective factors that can positively influence a child's life trajectory. While all of our programs and services are grounded in the theoretical foundations presented in this theory of change, there are also some programs that have been recognised as being evidence based interventions.



Outcomes Pyramid Step



How a child responds to the circumstances that influence its life trajectory has a genetic starting point. The characteristics of the child play an important role in regulating the child's reaction to its environment by influencing its sensitivity to stress and governing the production of hormones that mediate attachment and social behaviour, shapes personality and temperament. The child's intelligence, motivation, capacity for emotional regulation, and aptitude for optimism and perseverance strengthens or weakens the child's predisposition for resilience (Legge 2018).

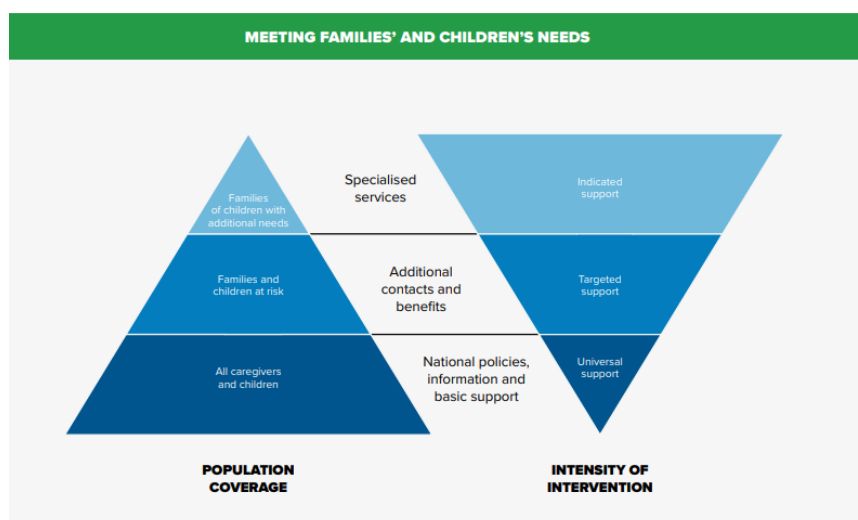
Children with a positive temperament, above-average intelligence, and social competence are able engender critical supplementary support from other environments such as school and community, and positive relationships with peers, teachers, and other adults, compared to other children who lack an easy-going persona and an ability to get along with others. (Moore et al 2017).

Resilient children and families are their able to bounce back from adversity or a traumatic experience. Similarly, resilient communities are those able to bounce back after a disaster such as a bushfire or flood or pandemic.

Legge (2018) reminds us that many of the factors that undermine resilience are beyond the scope of one organisation to address:

- Family socio-economic disadvantage
- Insecure or inadequate housing
- Cultural and political influences such as broader social policies

Proportionate Universalism



Nurturing Care Framework: Continuum of Care, WHO, UNICEF and World Bank Group (2018)

Play Matters Australia aligns to the global Nurturing Care Framework (WHO, UNICEF, World Bank Group 2018) in that we advocate that the three levels of system support: universal, targeted and indicated must “work together, **forming a seamless continuum of care**. That is because families might move between levels, depending on the challenges they face at different points in their lives” (WHO 2018; 28). We also strongly advocate that universal support is designed to benefit all families, caregivers and children across Australia, regardless of their risk, place of residence, or financial means.

Play Matters Australia strongly advocates that play is essential to healthy childhood development and that the right to play is a universal human right. We believe that children and families, wherever they live, the diversity of their backgrounds and life experiences should all be able to universally participate in, and have equitable access to, non-stigmatising, soft-entry services and resources that are designed to support the needs of children, carers and parents. We advocate that playgroups, soft-entry child and parenting services that bring both children and families together though the mechanism of play should be available to all Australian families in every postcode of Australia. We believe playgroups, play-based services and therapeutic responses that promote resilient child and family outcomes should be a fundamental pillar of all the Early Years policy landscape.

In recognition of the significant role that family socio-economic disadvantage plays in undermining child and family well-being, and in recognition of the place-based nature of disadvantage in Australia (Tanton et al 2021), our Theory of Change is underpinned by our model of proportionate universalism. We have identified priority Australian communities based on need and location. Our model of Proportionate Universalism seeks to determine a fair distribution of resources based on a commitment to the principle of equity. It strategically balances targeted and universal approaches by delivering universalism with an intensity related to the level of social need.

We believe our Theory of Change, based on a serious consideration of cause and effect, theory and evidence, gives us our best chance of delivering programs, services and advocacy that respond to the needs of contemporary Australian families, and build resilient children, families and communities for the challenges of the coming decade.



References

Bronfenbrenner U & Morris P (2006) The Bioecological Model of Human Development In R. M. Lerner & W. Damon (Eds.), *Handbook of child psychology: Theoretical models of human development* (pp. 793–828). John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Bronfenbrenner U (2005) Ecological systems theory (1992). In U. Bronfenbrenner (Ed.), *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development* (pp. 106–173), Sage Publications Ltd.

Ryan R & Deci E (2017) *Self-Determination Theory: Basic Psychological Needs in Motivation, Development, and Wellness 1st Edition*, Guilford Press, New York

Gray, P. (2013). *Free to learn: Why unleashing the instinct to play will make our children happier, more self-reliant, and better prepared for life*. New York: Basic Books.

Doucleff M (2021) *Hunt, Gather, Parent: What Ancient Cultures Can Teach Us About the Lost Art of Raising Happy, Helpful Little Humans*, Avid Reader Press/Simon & Schuster, New York.

Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) *General comment No. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts: Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, United Nations, New York.

Flückiger B et al (2015) *Age-appropriate pedagogies for the early years of schooling: Foundation paper*, Department of Education and Training, Queensland.

Robinson C et al (2018) *Learning Through Play: Creating a Play Based Approach within Early Childhood Contexts*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Brown S (2013) TED "Best of the Web" pick, *TED.com*.

https://www.ted.com/talks/stuart_brown_play_is_more_than_just_fun?language=en

Legge E (2018), *Risk and protective factors in early childhood: An ecological perspective*, CoLab Evidence Report, Telethon Kids Institute, Western Australia.

Moore T et al (2017) *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper*, Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute, Victoria.

Tanton R et al (2021) *Dropping Off the Edge 2021: Persistent and multilayered disadvantage in Australia*, Jesuit Social Services, Melbourne.

Council of Australian Governments (COAG) (2009) *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra

Gregory T et al (2016) *It takes a village to raise a child: The influence and impact of playgroups across Australia*, Telethon Kids Institute, South Australia

McShane I et al (2016) *Relationships Matter: The Social and Economic Benefits of Community Playgroups*, RMIT, Melbourne



Clopton A & Finch B (2011) "Re-conceptualizing social anchors in community development: utilizing social anchor theory to create social capital's third dimension", *Community Development*, 42:1, 70-83.

Gibson M (2018) *Rapid Evidence Review of Supported Playgroups that Support Aboriginal Communities*, The Centre for Family Research and Evaluation, Victoria.

House of Representatives Select Committee on Intergenerational Welfare Dependence (2019), *Living on the Edge: Inquiry into Intergenerational Welfare Dependence*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Tanton R et al (2021) *Dropping Off the Edge 2021: Persistent and multilayered disadvantage in Australia*, Jesuit Social Services, Melbourne.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). *Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships: Working Paper No. 1*. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) (2021) *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Early Childhood Strategy*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Moore, T.G., Arefadib, N., Deery, A., & West, S. (2017). *The First Thousand Days: An Evidence Paper*. Parkville, Victoria; Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

Lancet (2017) *Advancing early childhood development: from science to scale*. The Lancet

World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Bank Group (2018) *Nurturing care for early childhood development: a framework for helping children survive and thrive to transform health and human potential*. Geneva: World Health Organization.

World Health Organisation (WHO) (2020) *Improving early childhood development: WHO guideline*. Geneva.

Perry, B. D. (2006). *Applying Principles of Neurodevelopment to Clinical Work with Maltreated and Traumatized Children: The Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics*. In N. B. Webb (Ed.), *Working with traumatized youth in child welfare* (pp. 27–52). The Guilford Press.

Wadsworth B (1971) *Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development: An Introduction for Students of Psychology and Education*, McKay, New York.

Vygotsky L. S. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Centre on the Developing Child (2014), <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/serve-and-return/>, downloaded 3 March 2022, Harvard University.

