



Submission to the  
Select Committee on  
reproductive, maternal and  
paediatric health services in  
Tasmania

January 2024

## Acknowledgement of Country

Playgroup Tasmania acknowledges that we live, work and play on Aboriginal land, land of the palawa people of lutruwita (Tasmania). We pay our respects to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community, to elders past and present and to all those who continue to care for country, sharing stories and upholding rights.

## About Playgroup Tasmania

### *Our vision*

Families with young children and babies are supported to flourish physically, emotionally and socially through their connections to Tasmania's playgroup community.

Playgroup Tasmania is the peak body representing volunteer-led and organisational playgroups across Tasmania.

For more than 50 years playgroups have provided children and their families with connection, support and play experiences. Playgroups contribute to communities' resilience by empowering families and leveraging the existing strengths within communities and building social capital through volunteer engagement and capacity building.

The playgroup model is a powerful tool to support the wellbeing of communities across Tasmania and to provide information and support to families in their crucial role as their child's first and most significant teachers.

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## Executive Summary

Tasmanian families want perinatal, maternal, paediatric and child health information and services but are often left to their own devices because of lack of confidence, geographic and social isolation and variations in availability and accessibility of these resources. Breaking down these barriers is the challenge that sits at the heart of this submission.

Playgroup Tasmania consulted with more than 120 families while preparing this submission, gaining valuable insights from their lived experiences with reproductive, maternal, and paediatric health services in Tasmania. Despite the diversity in these stories, common themes emerged, highlighting the challenges faced by families in accessing information and services.

*“I think the biggest barrier to not accessing appropriate support was that I wasn’t able to identify that I needed it. I just thought what I was experiencing was part of becoming a Mum, but looking back now I definitely believe I suffered from post-natal anxiety and possibly even depression”*

*Playgroup Tas Community Member, Postcode 7248*

In our role as an advocate for families and in our ongoing work with them during the critical first 1000 days of a child’s life, Playgroup Tasmania is familiar with the opportunities presented by families who are seeking information and open to understanding as much as possible about all stages of their parenting experience and child’s development.

Families tell us that consistency, equitable access to services and support, availability and trust are all key to ensuring they can identify whether they need support and to ask the questions that will bring them into contact with the services they need.

Playgroup Tasmania works to support families to get the best start by linking parents/caregivers with each other, their communities and relevant services and supports. Playgroup Tasmania is directly involved with implementation of the Tasmanian Government’s Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy action plan and the recommendations in this submission take the Strategy’s framework and planned outcomes into account.

Our advocacy extends to programs and services that offer whole-of-family support and capacity building. It is crucial that our strategies and interventions focus on the community, ensuring inclusivity in all services, activities, and programs.

In line with this, we recognise the vital importance of contemporary and responsive service provision to meet the needs of modern families by providing a range of access options including face-to-face, online, and community-based services across varying geographical locations.

*“It was difficult to access parenting support services because of transport, location and fear of judgment .”*

*Playgroup Tas Community Member, postcode 7253*

Playgroup Tasmania’s submission reflects the voices of Tasmania’s families, the expertise of our staff, discussions with the broader community and our ongoing experience working towards the outcomes of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy.

We are grateful to the families who took the time to share their insights, feelings and experiences with us. It is these honest and open responses that ensure this submission is relevant and, we hope, leads to effective improvements in services that support families and children to thrive physically, emotionally and socially.

## Key Themes

### **Variations in the accessibility and availability of support and information**

Variations in the availability and accessibility of information and services was a strong theme identified throughout our consultation.

Barriers identified included:

- long waitlists
- no services in their location
- digital accessibility barriers
- financial barriers
- a lack of knowledge or confusion about what information and services are currently available to them.

Both expecting and new parents are clearly searching for information. While those families who found support, information and referral pathways expressed satisfaction, a large number described themselves as confused about services or stated that they simply did not know the services existed.

### **Lack of confidence**

New and expecting parents shared their feelings of vulnerability and insecurity in their early parenting experience. Many families expressed a lack of confidence to engage with services, especially in the private sector, and a fear of being judged and further isolated.

Some parents talked to us about their unsatisfactory experiences engaging with services and how this impacted negatively upon them and prevented them from seeking further support, even though they felt they needed it.

### **Isolation**

Families commented on the impacts of a sense of isolation and lack of support networks. Some respondents identified a decline in their mental wellbeing and their capacity as new parents.

## Summary of recommendations

### **Recommendation 1: Empower “villages” through the establishment of both whole of state and localised networks of support.**

Form a comprehensive network of informal and formal supports that maximise the benefits of local community-based support options (family groups, playgroups, etc)- through integrating them in with more formal supports such as health professionals and health organisations. This network should facilitate collaborative efforts, resource sharing, and streamlined support for families in need.

### **Recommendation 2: Enhance perinatal mental health service accessibility.**

Significantly enhance the accessibility of perinatal mental health services for Tasmanian families by providing clear, comprehensive information and a diverse range of service delivery options, including digital and in-person resources.

Furthermore, strengthen the integration of perinatal mental health services into existing services and initiatives identified under Rethink 2020, and leverage regional and demographic health planning approaches to maximise local workforces, networks, resources, and community assets.

This approach should aim to mitigate the challenges posed by socioeconomic and geographical constraints and reduce the impact of mental health specialists and resource shortages within vulnerable communities.

### **Recommendation 3: Establish accessible pathways for families with disabilities and/or developmental delays.**

Create accessible and welcoming 'soft entry' pathways for families with children who have disabilities and/or developmental delays. These pathways should be designed to provide gentle, supportive entry points into necessary services and resources.

### **Recommendation 4: Guarantee consistent and equitable service access.**

Ensure consistent and equitable access to services and support for all Tasmanian families, regardless of their location or socioeconomic status. This should involve a commitment to removing barriers and addressing disparities in service availability and quality – and working with system partners, local clinicians and service providers, and other supporting agencies within priority communities, to develop and promote localised referral pathways.

**Recommendation 5: Establish a coordinated online information service and communication platform.**

Invest in a Connected Families Online Service including a fully functional digital platform that enables families to access all the information they need in one place. The Tasmanian Government would implement and host the site, supported by a robust governance model to ensure all resources, including those provided by the community sector, are kept up to date and remain relevant.

## Introduction

Playgroup Tasmania welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the appointed Select Committee on reproductive, maternal and paediatric health services in Tasmania.

This submission draws on the knowledge and experience of Playgroup Tasmania and, importantly, has been shaped by the voices of many Tasmanian families who have shared their experiences of pregnancy, birth and child health services.

As an organisation our primary focus is on supporting connections and play for families with children from pregnancy to age 5. Our vision is that families with young children and babies are supported to flourish through their connections to Tasmania's playgroup community. We recognise parents and caregivers as their children's first teachers and emphasise the importance of play and attachment in early childhood development. Playgroup Tasmania acknowledges the commitment of the Tasmanian Government to its Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy and shares the belief that "the wellbeing of children and young people is our shared responsibility".

The submission provides our assessment of the adequacy, accessibility and safety for Tasmanian parents and their children of the following four areas as outlined in the Terms of Reference for the Select Committee:

1. maternal health services,
2. perinatal mental health services,
3. paediatric services for children aged 0-5 years, and
4. the Child Health and Parenting Service (CHaPS)

It examines the disparities in the availability of services, staffing and outcomes between Tasmanians living in rural, regional and metropolitan areas as well as those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Our discussion is focused on the experience of children and families as they access these services as well as how this has impacted upon their wellbeing.

Each section includes recommendations on actions that Playgroup Tasmania believes can be taken by the State Government to ensure reproductive, maternal and paediatric health and perinatal mental health services meet the needs of Tasmanian parents, families and children.



## 1. Maternal Health Services

### *Adequacy*

Tasmanian families have access to maternal health services during the antenatal period through both the private and public systems. These services range from GPs and antenatal clinics to group midwifery, private obstetricians and other private providers. Families report they are often accessing multiple support programs during this period.

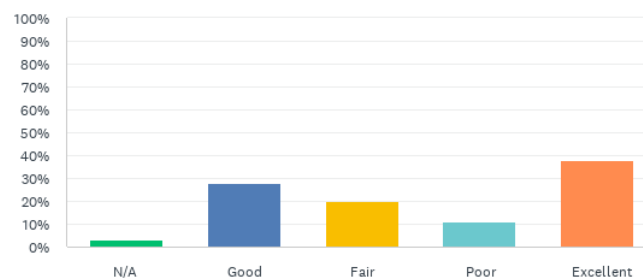
These additional external/private programs include approaches to birth coaching and support such as hypnobirthing which may indicate that parents are seeking a greater focus on the birthing experience.

Accessing maternal health support and services on the birthing journey can be inconsistent.

*66% of respondents reported having access to adequate opportunities to meet with their midwives.*

*86% reported their choices and decisions were supported by their midwives.*

Q28 How would you rate the overall care you received during your labour and birth?



A regionally fragmented system of maternal health and parenting support is creating confusion, with families experiencing an absence of consistent, seamless continuity of care through antenatal and birthing to postnatal support upon discharge. This includes limited availability of new parent groups which do not routinely or systematically transition them to other services. Some services are only available to certain families or in certain areas, and there are service delivery gaps including support for disability, perinatal anxiety and depression.

One mother told us:

*“I would have liked to have attended birth and parenting classes but for BOTH of my pregnancies these were not available or running for me to attend. That means for at least two years the THS was not providing these.”*

*Playgroup Tas Community Member, Postcode 7315*

### *Accessibility*

Pregnancy and early parenthood are particularly vulnerable times for most families with a potential increase in financial, health and housing stress. Families may move in and out of these situational vulnerabilities over time.

Ensuring that services are both universally accessible and targeted to specific needs would allow families to receive the right support, in the right place and at the right time.

Currently, there are limited programs offering additional support to families with higher levels of need. Additional targeted supports would complement existing universal programs and provide support to families when they need it. These could be delivered using the playgroup platform.

### *Safety*

Although 79% of families who responded to our survey indicated they received the maternal care they needed where they needed it, there was a number who felt physically or emotionally unsafe.

*“I actually went home earlier than I should have because I felt so uncomfortable with her (my midwife).”*

*Playgroup Tas Community Member, Postcode 7000*

*“My midwife was excellent however my experiences with doctors were disheartening. I felt pressure to book a C-Section which was not what I wanted.”*

*Playgroup Tas Community Member, Postcode 7310*

*“As a first-time mum I felt overwhelmed and unsupported during my care with the clinic at the hospital.”*

*Playgroup Tas Community Member, Postcode 7248*

*Recommendation 1*

*Establish a network of health professionals, health organisations and families in locations across Tasmania.*

Playgroup Tasmania recommends that a network of health professionals, health organisations and families be established in locations across Tasmania. Such a network aligns with priority three of Tasmania's Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy to improve cross-agency and cross-sectoral collaboration and integration and would work to facilitate information sharing and collaboration between services.

Establishment of these networks, along with an effective communication campaign, would assist in ensuring that there are appropriate supports available to families when and where they are needed.

## 2. Perinatal Mental Health Services

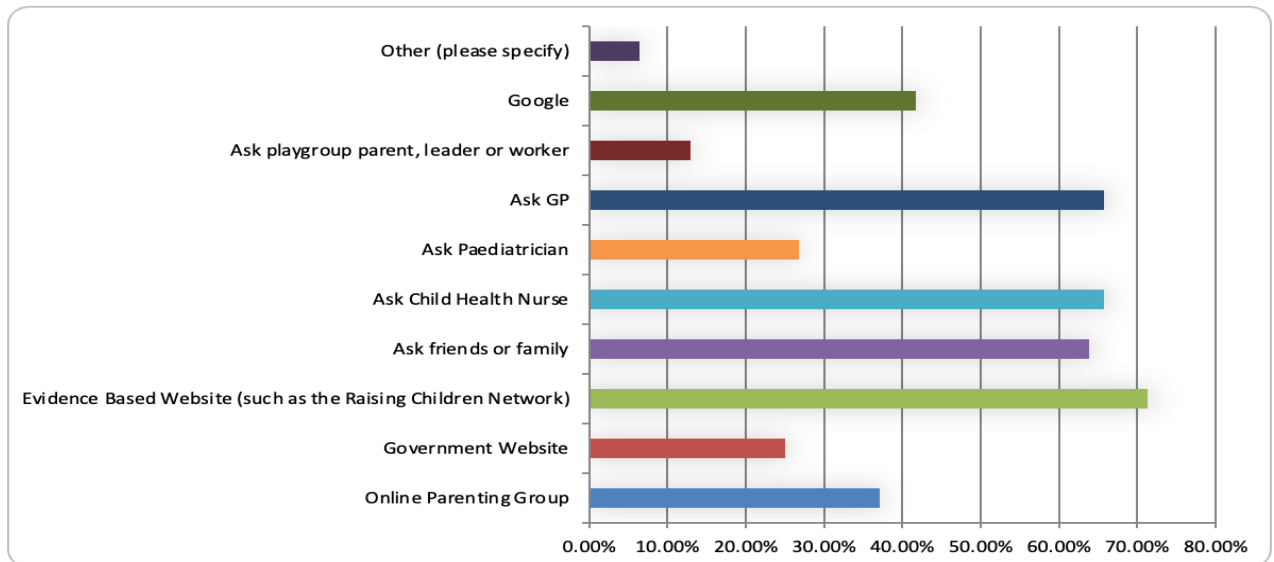
### *Adequacy*

The delivery system for universal child and family wellbeing programs/services in Tasmania is experienced inconsistently.

Some families are well connected, with strong relationships within their local communities, good access to digital technology and high levels of capacity which mean they can find the services available in their area.

There are, however, many families who are struggling. In a recent survey more than 63% of new parents responded that they were concerned about their emotions or mental health and Playgroup Tasmania heard from many families that are finding it difficult to access information to support their perinatal mental health. They reported that existing online information is spread across numerous websites, is difficult to navigate, is not engaging or user friendly and is not always evidence based and up to date.

The table below details where families told us they go when seeking parenting and health related information about their children. Respondents were asked to tick all options that applied.



### *Accessibility*

The overwhelming message we received from families on this topic is that they are confused by existing information or are unable to access information about relevant services.

Parents tell us they are confused about how to access programs and services and whether services are compulsory or optional. They do not know where to go to get help if they are struggling, and they do not know what will happen if they do ask for help. They reported feeling that they receive mixed messages from health care and support services, online parenting groups and their circle of family and friends.

As one parent told us:

*“I think the biggest barrier to not accessing appropriate support was that I wasn’t able to identify that I needed it. I just thought what I was experiencing was part of becoming a Mum, but looking back now I definitely believe I suffered from post-natal anxiety and possibly even depression”*

*Playgroup Tas Community Member, Postcode 7248*

It is widely recognised that mental health issues and feelings of isolation have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 period in 2020–21. We continue to consult broadly with families to better understand their experience of parenting pre and post Covid.

Through our recent survey and previous consultations Playgroup Tasmania has heard:

- many have experienced some form of negative mental health after having a child including anxiety, depression, or other mental health issue/s, and
- for many, their own mental health problems have a moderate, or greater, impact on their ability to parent their children.

### *Safety*

It is crucial that all relevant services are aware of the impacts on the children when parents/caregivers are struggling with their mental health. By their own admission, these parents/caregivers acknowledge the impact that these problems have on their parenting capabilities. Parents with mental illness are more likely to experience disruptions in their relationship with their child, social isolation, disadvantage and effects of stigma. Services need to be designed and delivered in partnership with families experiencing these challenges to ensure they are adequate and have the wellbeing and safety of the whole family prioritised.

*Recommendation 2*

*Increase access to perinatal mental health services for Tasmanian families through improved information and a mix of service delivery options.*

Playgroup Tasmania recommends the Tasmanian Government provide increased access to perinatal mental health services for Tasmanian families. Clear information needs to be provided in an accessible format and include mixed service delivery with options for residential, community based and virtual support for families experiencing challenges.

### 3. Paediatric services for children aged 0-5 years

#### *Adequacy*

Families responding to our recent survey accessed paediatric services for a broad range of concerns including routine health checks, vaccination, reflex, sight and hearing concerns, suspected hernias, failure to thrive, epilepsy, eczema, allergies, developmental delays, and sleep and feeding concerns. Most families (67%) said that the information provided by the service was very or extremely useful, and 82% said they believe their child received the care they needed when and where they needed it. This included access to early intervention services such as speech therapy and occupational therapy if these were recommended.

There have, however, been recent changes to the Tasmanian Government's approach to delivering early intervention support for families with additional and complex needs, including:

- The Department of Education, Children and Youth's (DECYP) Early Childhood Inclusion Service (ECIS) is under review and transitioning from a therapeutic support model delivered in a place-based, universal service environment to a more education-based, inclusion-focus within public school settings. This focus on "inclusion" may create the perception of a one size fits all model which reduces parental choice and risks excluding families with complex needs.
- A withdrawal and scaling back of community and allied health services, including child therapeutic support such as Child Health and Parenting Services (CHaPS) nurses who no longer undertake all the recommended assessments as a surveillance system. The end of the SACS trial has meant that early identification and intervention opportunities are being missed. Playgroup Tasmania believes it is crucial that an 18-month surveillance check be included as routine for all Tasmania children.

#### *Accessibility*

Playgroup Tasmania believes that current paediatric services in Tasmania are inadequate and particularly the service system that supports our families with children with disability or other developmental delays.

Service providers, parents and carers told us that children in Tasmania are missing out on early diagnosis and interventions because of:

- The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)
- Problematic implementation and assessment processes impacting on service demand and access for families.
- Some challenges families are facing around participating in and accessing early intervention services or programs include:

- Services aren't available where and when families need them. Transport, distance, and isolation, particularly for those residing in rural and regional locations.
- Economic circumstances. For example, capacity to pay, constantly living in poverty given the needs of the child, private therapy is expensive, travel costs and migrant families and ineligible non-residents.
- Family circumstances or capacity to participate such as parent/carer health issues, health literacy, parent/carer mental health, including family trauma due to child circumstances, lack of childcare/support for siblings, family breakdown, separation, and divorce, first time mums and dads and English as a Second Language (ESL).
- Advocacy. For example, families lack information on how to access paediatric services in Tasmania including how to get a diagnosis and how to access and navigate NDIS to ensure that their children get the right level of support.

*"It took a long time to get in to see the paediatrician at the general hospital and by the time we saw them we probably didn't need to anymore"*

*Playgroup Tas Community Member, Postcode 7248*

### *Safety*

If families are not able to access timely and appropriate paediatric services for their children, the safety and wellbeing of these children is at risk. Research has shown that early identification and intervention promotes development, wellbeing and community participation for young children with disability and their families.

### *Recommendation 3*

*Provide a "soft entry" pathway option for families with children disability and/or developmental delay.*

Playgroup Tasmania recommends that "soft entry" pathways be provided as an option to families with children disability and/or developmental delay. Early intervention and support programs which are play based and allow families to connect with others going through the same experiences such as PlayConnect +, have proven beneficial for those children and families who (for a range of reasons) prefer not to engage in universal programs such as Launching into Learning.

Families have told us that the ECIS transition does not always meet their needs or respect their choices. As a consequence, some families are missing out on support from this service.



Paediatric services and support programs should be family centred, strength based, incorporate the use of trained peer and community workers as well as providing soft referral pathways to a network of existing services.

Playgroup Tasmania recommends the Tasmanian Government facilitate the practice of children accessing support and therapy in natural settings, inclusive of playgroup.

It is widely acknowledged that young children and families “get the best outcomes when they receive supports or therapies in their natural setting such as the home or kinder, rather than in a clinical setting” (Early childhood early intervention reset consultation papers | NDIS).

It is anticipated that incorporating natural settings practice would encourage a strength based and holistic approach to therapy. Children and families feel comfortable at playgroup and therapists/specialists have an ideal opportunity to work with them in a non-clinical environment.

## 4. Child Health and Parenting Service (CHaPS)

### *Adequacy*

Families report that support for new parents is available to a greater degree in some areas than others. More than 69% of families we spoke with did not attend a new baby/parent group and 34% of these families indicated that this service was not available in their area or that they did not know the service was available. Some families commented on the CHaPS model of new parent groups which limits availability to first time parents only:

*“I would really like there to be second (or more) time parenting groups...no one does anything for parents on more than one, navigating sibling life as well as relearning the basics of a baby.”*

*Playgroup Tas Community Member, 7248*

### *Accessibility*

Families report differing experiences engaging with CHaPS. These experiences range from extremely positive with continued engagement through to complete dissatisfaction and disengagement. This may go some way to explaining why not all families continue to engage with the service through to the four-year check-up.

CHaPS already works in place-based settings through its co-location in CFLCs; this could be extended to geographic locations where CFLCs do not exist by working in community settings alongside playgroups and other appropriate groups. This would support the building of trusting relationships between services and families in familiar, informal settings.

### *Recommendation 4*

*Consistent access to service and support for all Tasmanian families.*

Playgroup Tasmania recommends the Tasmanian Government continues to strengthen the Child Health and Parenting Service (CHaPS) model to provide consistent access to service and support across the state, including access to all recommended health checks and offering new parent groups to all families in partnership with local family community support stakeholders.

Also recommended is the addition of an app-based option for new parents. With appropriate support, a free digital app would allow parents and families the ease and convenience of digital access and real time support when it is needed as well as appointment reminders and the location of relevant services and supports.

*Recommendation 5*

*Access to an online information service and coordinated communication.*

Playgroup Tasmania recommends the Tasmanian Government invest in a Connected Families Online Service.

This service would be a fully functional digital platform that enables families to access all the information they need in one place. The Tasmanian Government would implement and host the site, supported by a robust governance model so that all resources including community sector resources are kept up to date and are relevant.

The website would link to external sources of information relevant to pregnancy, birth and parenting with updated local contacts and pathways, would be made available.

Not only would this website be a valuable tool for Tasmanian parents and caregivers it would also be invaluable to service providers who would use it to provide wrap around support to their clients, offering extra services and opportunities that are accurate, relevant, and locally specific to them.

For the Connected Families Online Service to be a success it would need to be a “one stop shop” to access parenting information, health and parenting support services, disability support and services and community sector activities and events.

The Connected Families Online Service would need to be a contemporary and engaging service. Ideally, in a second phase of rollout, this online platform would be complemented by an app that was linked to the Child Health and Parenting Service. This could be used to book appointments and would ideally be linked to the Immunisation Register, connect to the Parent Line, and provide links to local services and activities. A similar app is currently in use in Victoria.

# Appendix 1

[Playgroup Tasmania Strategic Plan 2022-25](#)

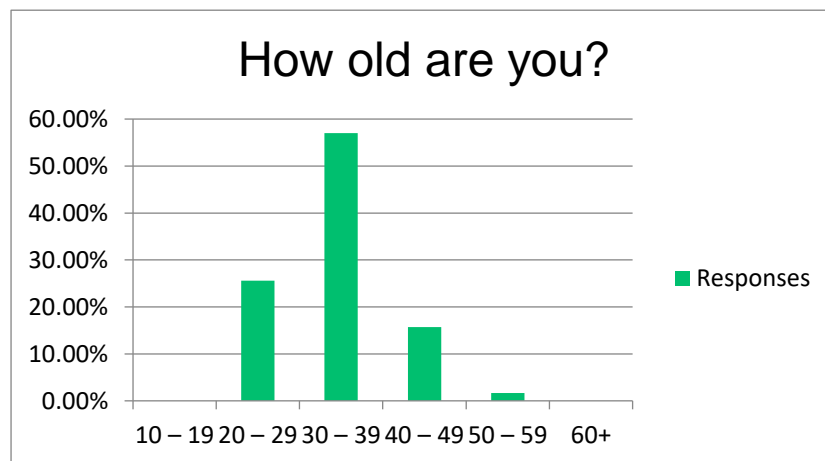
# Appendix 2

## [Voices of Families](#)

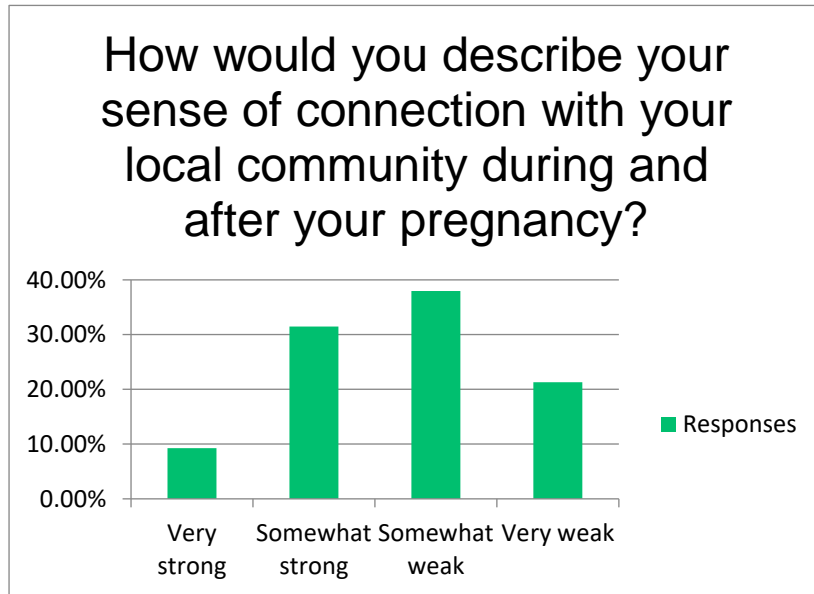
Playgroup Tasmania listens to the voices of children and their families to ensure programs and services meet their needs. We recently conducted a survey asking about family's experiences with Pregnancy, Birth and Child Health Services in Tasmania.

**Total responses:** 121

### Age range of respondents



**Connection to community**



**Below is a snapshot of the responses we received.**

*“It’s impossible to get into specialists or supports in a timely manner except if going private which not everyone can afford.”* Playgroup Tas Community Member, postcode 7310

*“I just got made out to feel like a bad mother at times. My concerns weren’t validated, there was ultimately nothing they could do, but I think a little compassion for the challenges it involved could go a long way”.* Playgroup Tas Community Member, postcode 7310

*“The child and family centre helped greatly with assessment, ECIS/school and paediatrician appointments”* Playgroup Tas Community Member, postcode 7253

*“It was difficult to access parenting support services because of transport, location and fear of judgement.”* Playgroup Tas Community Member, postcode 7253



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