


GUMALA ABORIGINAL CORPORATION

3a playgroups





Doing It Our Way – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led early intervention program

From 2020 to 2021, SNAICC – National Voice for our Children identified good practices of early intervention and family support programs that are being delivered by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations across the nation.

This is one of 11 profiles that demonstrates how community-controlled organisations are achieving positive results for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, including supporting these children to be kept safe from harm, uphold their right to grow up within their own family and community, and access critical health and early education services.

Gumala Aboriginal Corporation

3a playgroups

South Hedland, Tom Price, Wakuthuni, Marble Bar, Roebourne and Karratha — North-western Western Australia (Pilbara Region)

ACRONYMS

| | |
|-------------|-------------------------------------|
| 3A | Abecedarian Approach Australia |
| AEDC | Australian Early Development Census |
| EACH | Enhanced Aboriginal Child Health |
| GP | general practitioner |
| YLUA | Yandi Land Use Agreement |

OVERVIEW

Gumala Aboriginal Corporation ('Gumala') runs the 3a playgroups program in Western Australia's central and northern Pilbara region, implementing the 3a methodology – Abecedarian Approach Australia – in its six playgroup sites. Through this program, the corporation reaches local Aboriginal children aged 0–5 years and their families with an evidence-based early childhood teaching and learning strategy designed specifically to support and strengthen vulnerable Aboriginal families.

Distinctively, these playgroups work towards building up both the children and adults who participate, requiring parents/caregivers to attend each session with their child. The playgroups also upskill Aboriginal parents/caregivers to take on the roles of facilitators and learning assistants. In doing so, the program achieves its aim to support and equip all attending parents/caregivers with the knowledge and skills to interact with young children in a way that will improve local children's development, support their transition into kindergartens and pre-primary schools, and enhance their long-term educational achievements. It also strengthens adults' capabilities and addresses families' social and wellbeing needs.

*"We're not just strengthening children;
we're building stronger communities"*

Gumala playgroup program presentation

The playgroups have been designed in consultation with local Aboriginal communities and families, with parents/caregivers involved in ongoing decision making about playgroup activities and being responsible for tracking the progress of their own children. This has resulted in the playgroups being responsive to the needs of their participants and reflecting the rich Aboriginal cultural landscapes of the communities that they serve.

Families are also supported by the intricate network of Aboriginal corporations, government agencies and non-government organisations that Gumala has linked with in order to build up referral pathways between the playgroups and Pilbara support services. In doing so, Gumala is ensuring that those families in need can access the playgroups as well as health and social supports that they need to thrive.

"[The program doesn't] just work on the children, it's also working with the parents, and getting them more involved and more confident and building on their skills as well. So, I think it's great because it's a two-way thing. It's not just the children that you're working on, it's actual family and the parents"

Gumala 3a team member



ORGANISATION

Gumala is a community-controlled Traditional Owners' association with a head office in Tom Price, main member service operations in Perth, and operating across most of the Pilbara region of Western Australia. In 2016, Census of Population and Housing data indicated that Aboriginal people made up over 13% of the approximately 45,000 people living in the Pilbara.

Gumala was formed in 1996 during Native Title negotiations to represent the collective interests of the Banjima, Yinhawangka and Nyiyaparli peoples—the Traditional Owners of the central and northern Pilbara.¹ As a result of these negotiations, the Yandi Land Use Agreement (YLUA) was signed in 1997 and compensation monies are now paid to the General Gumala Foundation, a charitable trust managed by Gumala. In turn, this trust funds programs and services that benefit the Traditional Owners of the lands covered by the YLUA.

Gumala is a member-based organisation with a current membership of more than 1,800 people. Underpinning its operation is the overall guiding objective to provide direct relief from poverty, sickness, destitution, misfortune and homelessness to all Aboriginal people who are members of the Banjima, Yinhawangka and Nyiyaparli language groups. This includes registered Gumala members and beneficiaries of the YLUA trust deed.

Accordingly, Gumala provides direct financial support to its members to access a wide range of programs and services offered by external providers. These include education (pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary); skills development and certification; healthcare; housing (mortgage deposits, household repairs and utility bills); vehicle maintenance; visual and performing arts; Aboriginal cultural activities, including lore ceremonies; sports and recreation; funerals; and emergency assistance.

As well as connecting members with external supports, Gumala also directly operates a range of community and economic development programs, including the 3a playgroups program. In doing so, it upskills people in the local communities and helps them access employment opportunities.

THE ABECEDARIAN APPROACH AUSTRALIA – HOW IS THE 3A METHODOLOGY DIFFERENT

"I've been a teacher for 18 years but until I did the 3a training, I had no idea. I knew early years [were] important for a child's education and engaging families in order for them to be successful at school, but I had no idea that the most important time for a child's brain development is that zero to three years. So basically, from birth to three years is when you need to be engaging and reading and doing all these different activities with your child to promote language development and healthy brain development. And people don't know that, and they have no idea of the importance of it"

Gumala 3a team member

During the 1970s, Dr Craig Ramey and Dr Joseph Sparling conducted a longitudinal study of children born into severely disadvantaged life circumstances in the United States of America. This study was known as the Abecedarian Project and laid the foundations to the Abecedarian Approach. The project "centred on an intervention that involved intensive learning and social-emotional supports – starting in infancy and continuing until at least" the child's entry into kindergarten.²

The broad-spectrum Abecedarian Approach emphasises the role of young children as active learners and the value of response-contingent feedback from a child's environment. As very young children spend most of their days involved in incidentally educational activities, like eating, dressing, exploration, play and dynamic interactions with adults, the approach is designed to incorporate educational techniques into common events of living and caregiving. It does so by having the adults engage the children in playful interactions, provide the children with enriched care, and build up stable relationships between the children and their parents/caregivers.

The approach centres around four key elements: language priority, learning games, conversational reading, and enriched caregiving.

The first element emphasises that children acquire fluency with language to strengthen their early learning and school readiness. The approach highlights the importance of rich language interactions between children and their caregivers, and that these take part on an individualised, frequent and intentional basis throughout the day, including through the other three elements.

“Language allows children to organise their thoughts and explain their ideas; it gives them the means to express their feelings; and it gives them the tools they need to interact with peers and adults. Language also allows the child to use private speech, talking aloud to themselves to work through a problem or regulate their emotions. As a child gets older, they internalise this speech so that it is no longer out loud but still a means of guiding their behaviour”³

3a website, Melbourne Graduate School of Education

The approach’s focus on active enriched caregiving helps build and normalise healthy parent-child interactions. Further to this, it increases parents’ skills and confidence and supports their increased literacy. This element is highly relevant in supporting positive long-term social and community-orientated behaviours on a broad scale.

In the early 2010s, researchers at the University of Melbourne’s Graduate School of Education collaborated with Dr Joseph Sparling to adapt the approach to the Australian context – now known as the 3a methodology. While the core

needs are equally important for families in both countries, some characteristics of the Australian context require the methods and their delivery to be customised. These include the geographic remoteness of many Australian communities, the experiences of Aboriginal families in light of Australia’s colonisation and Stolen Generations, and the interrupted practice of some Aboriginal languages and traditional child-rearing systems. The learning games element, for example, was adjusted in consultation with Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory through an adaptation and trialling process led by the Northern Territory Department of Education.

Gumala has been one of the first organisations in Australia to implement the 3a methodology, having worked on it since 2012 in partnership with the University of Melbourne’s Graduate School of Education. In that year, it developed a unique early childhood centre and learning program in the remote community at Wakuthuni, supported through a partnership with the University of Melbourne and Tom Price Primary School. It also was influential in the 3a project receiving official state government endorsement, via a partnership agreement signed by the Western Australian Minister of Education in 2012. Over the past decade, Gumala has launched a further five playgroups in the Pilbara region.

Given the relatively short timeframe since the 3a methodology was developed, research into its effectiveness in Aboriginal contexts is still in the early stages. However, existing evidence is promising.⁴ For example, a 2019 study⁵ looked at the 3a approach in two Arnhem Land communities and concluded:



"... the implementation of 3a teaching and learning strategies through early childhood playgroup programmes is positively associated with Aboriginal children's language and other developmental outcomes. The degree of exposure to Conversational Reading and Learning Games ... was a predictor of improvements in children's language and overall development"

"Embedding culture and local language into the 3a programme was an essential component of its success, along with quality of the programme implementation"

"The outcomes suggest that [3a] delivers a meaningful set of strategies to support early childhood learning ... and has the potential to help improve educational outcomes for young Aboriginal children in remote communities"

Data from the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) also suggests that children who attend playgroups in general are less likely to be scored as 'vulnerable' across all developmental domains than children who do not attend playgroups.⁷ These domains include: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills (schools-based); and communication skills and general knowledge.

3A BENEFITS⁸

Children

- Early intervention education is substantially more effective than later-life education intervention
- The approach
 - supports positive future school attendance through collaboration with local primary schools
 - builds trust for children when interacting with teachers in a safe environment
 - provides a smooth transition to formal education, ensuring children are prepared for school
 - establishes lifelong healthy behavioural patterns for children
 - encourages participation and attendance in education
- 3a-related research over 30 years has found that children exposed to the 3a approach have experienced health benefits, such as lower levels of cholesterol, hypertension and obesity, compared to children who have not been exposed to the program

Parents

- The approach
 - is designed to normalise healthy parent-child interactions
 - increases parents' skills and confidence
- Parents/caregivers involved in 3a have become respected role models in remote communities

The wider community

- The 3a curriculum
 - is designed to be easy to implement in remote and rural communities
 - has been associated with positive long-term social and community-orientated behaviours



HOW THE 3A GUMALA PLAYGROUPS OPERATE

Wherever possible, playgroup sessions run for two to three hours per day, five days per week, during school terms. Each session is planned, purposeful and fun as well as carefully designed to be age, developmentally and culturally appropriate. A child's experiences in these sessions support their foundational learning and development, with each 3a element contributing to the overarching priority of language. Participants are encouraged to converse in the three local Aboriginal languages and many of the learning materials incorporate these languages.

Every facet of the program aims to acknowledge and respect the roles that the participating families play in raising strong and healthy Aboriginal children. As is fundamental to the 3a methodology, parents/caregivers are purposefully recognised as the children's first teachers and are required to participate in the sessions. They watch the playgroup team model key elements of the 3a methodology so that they can replicate the positive, respectful rich language interactions in the home environment. Parents/caregivers and children both benefit from the routine and structure of the playgroups and from spending time in a respectful, supportive, peer-to-peer learning environment.

"It's building the capacity of families and trying to build that engagement [by showing] families the benefits of children being engaged in those centres, because it has very clear benefits and improvements. When you can see children who have access to the centre and then when they start kindy and pre-primary, they're a lot more settled and used to routines, and more able to fit into school than children who [do not] have experience of playgroup or limited experience"

Gumala 3a team member

Families are not only supported through educational activities. The playgroups also provide nutritious meals and snacks at each session to encourage attendance and healthy living. On occasion, participants are involved in preparing and serving these snacks and meals to create opportunities for them to discuss nutrition and learn healthy recipes. Learning activities are also taken outside of the classroom and occasional sessions are held in local parks, at swimming pools or over a

community barbeque. Where possible⁹ (and ideally at all locations in the future), Gumala provides a bus service to and from the playgroup venue as transport has been recognised as a key element to increasing families' engagement.

"I was very impressed to see some dads in attendance, which I hadn't seen before at any other centres. And they had been coming regularly. I also noticed ... when they have playgroup offsite, say at the park, they usually get really good attendance"

Gumala 3a team member

Three of the six playgroups have their own fixed locations and setups. These permanent spaces have helped Gumala create culturally safe, homelike environments where everyone can build up a sense of belonging. The benefits of a single site are that it creates a sense of familiarity for participants, encouraging them to feel at ease and intermingle with each other and with the playgroup team. It also gives the team the opportunity to display culturally safe signifiers, 3a strategy posters, and the children's artworks, as well as establishes and strengthens regular attendance and routines.

Where playgroups are run in partner sites, such as the local child and parent facilities, the playgroup often has to limit its days per week. This impacts on families' learnings and immersion in the 3a methodology. Gumala also recognises that this is a further barrier to families' engagement with the playgroup and regularly considers ways to counter this, including by scouting for suitable permanent locations. The South Hedland playgroup recently identified a site and will start operating from this location in 2022.

"[South Hedland playgroup] having their own place as well is a really big thing because we've just seen struggles with Hedland, how difficult it was for them every day to be moving around to different places with their own children as well. Carting the supplies plus the kids. I think that's just a really big key thing because they can also have that cultural inclusion, that sense of belonging where they're creating this space, first impressions – this is me, this is where I belong – and I think that's really important"

Gumala 3a team member



Fundamental to the success of the program is its operational flexibility, which allows each playgroup to develop its own identity and way of belonging to its particular community. The professional team gathers feedback from parents/caregivers through surveys completed each term. The data from these surveys feed into the playgroup's day-to-day functioning and longer-term planning, ensuring that the playgroup is targeting families with what they need the most, as well as closely reflects the priorities and aspirations of the community, empowers families to be active leaders, and champions culture.

Through these surveys, each facilitator is also able to gather data on each child and build up a profile based on parents/caregivers' observations of their child's progress. Progress can now be tracked and individual plans can be developed to support a child and their family in achieving their individualised learning and education goals.

"We do feedback sheets with families once a term [on what] they notice within their own children, and that's where we see those things, such as the confidence, the independence, becoming more used to routines, the sharing and interacting with other children positively. So, all of those social and emotional outcomes [are] probably the first things that families see. But also, for example, staff's children who attend the centres regularly, [staff] notice a more advanced oral language development than [in] children who are sporadic in their attendance"

Gumala 3a team member



STRENGTHENING AND EMPOWERING FAMILIES

Along with addressing the developmental and learning capabilities of the children, the program also actively builds the capacity of participating adults. Parents/caregivers improve their parenting and educational skills by attending the sessions, learning how to use the 3a elements in their everyday lives, and watching the playgroup team model 3a behaviours. They also build long-lasting relationships in this space with the program team, other families, and outside services. These relationships support them to trust in the knowledge and skills of others and, in turn, build their confidence and experiment with new ways of *doing*. They are offered a safe space in which to practice positive social and wellbeing behaviours, realise that they have the ability to employ positive learning strategies at home with their own children, and access community supports as and when they need these.

One important factor in cultivating these relationships is staffing. Most playgroup team members come from the local Aboriginal communities. As such, they often already know most community members, what these members may require, and how best to engage with each community and family. Many team members are also parents of young children and bring their children to the playgroup (if they are not already enrolled), where they can model the 3a practices in their conversations and interactions.

The Gumala team regularly looks out for parents/caregivers who would be suited to work in the playgroup environment and offer training and support to these individuals to become learning assistants. Once this parent/caregiver has built up their confidence and teaching experience in this role, they can progress on to becoming a facilitator. Not only does this upskill community members and provide them with employment; it also demonstrates to other Aboriginal people that the necessary teaching expertise and cultural knowledge already exists in Pilbara Aboriginal communities.

"It's also amazing to see that the parents are the teachers and then they build their confidence, and then they can move on to being recognised as learning assistants. So, we employ them, and then they move on to being facilitators. I think that's just a great story within itself ... it's not just building your child, it's building the parent"

Gumala 3a team member

Several team members are trained in trauma-informed approaches and mental health first aid. With these skills, they are able to support the healing journeys of many families and identify potential mental health needs of some parents, caregivers and children. From here, they are able to encourage parents/caregivers to attend parenting groups and/or connect them in with specialised services, particularly when individual children have been identified as having special needs.

The playgroups also support families' ongoing literacy journeys by providing them with books through the Indigenous Literacy Foundation. Children are gifted the books on completion of their conversational reading activities, helping families to develop home libraries and continue reading activities outside of the playgroups.

Families are further supported through regular newsletter communications, social media updates, and (closed) Facebook groups. This is helping not only with information-sharing but also to build the sense of a close community, which is expected to exist long after families and children move to kindergartens and pre-schools.



RESPONDING TO THE HOLISTIC NEEDS OF FAMILIES

During monthly meetings, the playgroup team discuss each child and family's progress as well as possible referrals that would help the family. From here, the team identify and collaborate with local organisations and government agencies, inviting them to attend playgroup sessions. Playgroup teams then intentionally create a safe relaxed space so that families can feel comfortable and on an equal footing when engaging with external support agencies and services during the sessions.

Services invited to the playgroups cover health and wellbeing, family support and safety, food security, and sport and recreation services. Members of these services attend playgroup sessions to become familiar friendly faces, raise awareness about these services, and explain how to access these in future. In turn, this builds parents' confidence in relating to the service providers and in recognising and talking about their needs. Developing relationships of trust and confidence during this playgroup time is crucial in laying the groundwork for some parents to feel comfortable in accessing these other services outside of the sessions. At one playgroup, a local child health nurse spent a full school term attending the playgroup sessions to get to know children and families before she carried out any health checks or provided any health advice to participants.

Enhanced Aboriginal Child Health (EACH) teams regularly attend the playgroups, as this offers them the space to observe children in a relaxed setting, identify children's milestone developments and delays, and provide targeted supports. These multidisciplinary teams are made up of child health nurses, remote area nurses, Aboriginal health workers, midwives and medical officers. The supports that they provide include pop-up vaccination clinics, parent education, child development resources, and referrals to other health services. During the 2020 lockdown, EACH teams also conducted home visits to provide vaccinations to families.

Public and population health experts from the Western Australian Country Health Service also regularly attend playgroups and coordinate visits from specialists. Physiotherapists, dieticians, occupational therapists and speech pathologists have all spent time with the groups to connect with families and offer referral pathways to specialist services. Recently, Gumala and this service have

been exploring ways to deliver the *Act, Belong, Commit* campaign¹⁰ to support the mental health and wellbeing of playgroup teams, families and children.

Other organisations that regularly attend and offer support include:

- Chevron Pilbara Ear Health Program – a mobile ear-health service that visits educational facilities to provide free ear-health checks and hearing screenings and facilitates appointments for hearing tests, nurse-practitioner consultations, and appointments with specialists
- Foodbank Western Australia – offers food pantry and school breakfast programs and delivers a range of hands-on educational programs aimed at teaching healthy eating and cooking habits to communities throughout the Pilbara region
- EON Foundation – a non-profit organisation that works primarily with Aboriginal communities to support better nutrition and food security by creating fruit and vegetable gardens; getting children and families involved in growing, harvesting and cooking fresh produce; and delivering education in horticulture, nutrition and cooking.

An example of the program addressing families' needs and requests took place in late 2019. Parents of one playgroup said that they would like to visit the water playpark at the local aquatic centre during the hot summer months, but some parents were uncomfortable around water and did not know how to develop their children's water confidence or swimming abilities. The playgroup team met with a local Royal Lifesaving swimming instructor to explore how families could safely participate in aquatic activities, and Gumala financially supported the instructor to lead standalone tailored classes with playgroup children and parents – teaching swimming techniques and water safety through 3a-style strategies, such as games and singing. Following on from this success, other playgroups are now starting to organise swimming lessons for families and attend their local swimming pools.

Gumala also works closely with government agencies, Roebourne and South Hedland child and parent centres, Aboriginal health services, and women's shelters to cross-refer families. The Western Australia Department of Communities' child protection teams have been able to refer at-risk families to the playgroups, including young mothers and fathers who have recently left school or been disengaged from school and who have



had babies. The women's shelters refer mothers at risk of or experiencing family violence to the playgroups to help these women develop social capital and build connections within a safe space. At the same time, child health nurses and Aboriginal health workers who attend the groups are both able to identify families in the group who may require family violence interventions as well as refer at-risk families to the playgroups.

This cross-referral system is testament to Pilbara communities recognising the strengths of this program. In fact, attendance at Gumala's 3a playgroups has been specifically identified by the Western Australian Department of Communities as a way to strengthen families, and playgroup venues are approved venues for supervised visits between parents and children.

During a two-month COVID 19 pandemic lockdown in 2020, Gumala's playgroups team quickly reworked the program to remotely work with families. The team created individual learning packs to send to children's homes and support children's continued learning. These packs included learning games and craft activities, selected specifically for each child's needs, and easy-to-follow instructions and information to support the parents/caregivers. The responses from families were extremely

positive, with playgroup enrolments and requests for learning packs increasing through this period.

COMMUNITY CONTROL AND CULTURAL SAFETY

Gumala is owned and run by the Aboriginal communities of the Pilbara. The organisation answers directly to these community members through annual general meetings, in which members inform the Gumala board and management about the needs of the local community and have a say in how programs are delivered. Members also elect the board of directors, which is made up of between nine and 12 members, with a requirement that the composition includes a majority of Aboriginal people, a majority of Gumala members, and an equal number of Bunjima, Yinhawangka and Nyiyaparli people.

Gumala primarily employs local Aboriginal people to operate the playgroups. Team members are encouraged, and sometimes funded, to take up professional development opportunities, including 3a practitioner training, TAFE courses, and a



Certificate III and/or Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care. This capacity-building approach benefits the Aboriginal communities of the region by creating a broad skillset amongst community members. It also ensures that the program is able to employ skilled staff who can draw on Aboriginal knowledge bases as equally as Western early childhood educational practices.

As an Aboriginal corporation, Gumala has great awareness of the histories, lived experiences and unique needs of its members. As such, it is able to ensure that each playgroup is closely grounded in the cultures of the community that it serves and works to promote those cultures and languages on a daily basis. Cultural safety follows on naturally from having local Aboriginal community members as playgroup facilitators and learning assistants, as their cultural knowledge and lived experiences become deeply incorporated into the delivery of daily activities. Team members' close connections with their communities help establish cultural safety in circumstances that may otherwise be uncomfortable for families to experience with non-Indigenous strangers, such as discussing additional supports that they may require.

While some elements of cultural safety are practiced across all playgroup sites (and are inherent in the way that Gumala works), others look different across the settings as they are tailored to the unique needs of each community. Each playgroup has been designed in consultation with the local Aboriginal community to ensure that the playgroup reflects the contexts and identities of that community. Co-design is important for Gumala and requires listening to community members' needs, understanding their perspectives, and developing an approach that is right for each community rather than imposing an overseas methodology or simply reproducing what has been implemented in other Gumala locations. At the same time, universal elements include that all non-Indigenous staff participate in online cultural competency training through the Western Australia Department of Education, and some staff also undertake face-to-face training through Aboriginal Insights, a local Roebourne-based Aboriginal company.

To show connection to and care of Country, each playgroup has also developed their own site-specific Acknowledgement of Country, working off contributions from team members, parents/caregivers and children and carrying these out during each morning's Welcome Circle. The

Karratha playgroup has also started to organise for its families to spend time on Ngarluma and Yindjibarndi Country, supported through its strong relationships with the Traditional Owners and the Murujuga Aboriginal Corporation.

Children and parents/caregivers are encouraged to use their traditional languages alongside English, with the different languages of the Pilbara region recognised and discussed during playgroup sessions. Each playgroup has been provided with local language dictionaries to help the team and participants learn the languages of the Country on which they live. Further to this, the Karratha playgroup incorporates local languages in its Fundamental Movement Skills program (a partnership with the Western Australia Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries), having team members lead physical activities in language with children and families. The South Hedland playgroup was also able to employ a community Elder as a dedicated language teacher, until the Elder retired.

Visual arts are another important way that the range of Pilbara Aboriginal cultures are promoted in playgroups, including:

- local art is painted on the exterior of the Wakuthuni venue
- a chair was hand-built and donated by the local organisation, Real Employment for Aboriginal People, and decorated with each child's name and handprint at the Karratha playgroup
- cultural resources are displayed in the Marble Bar venue.

Many of the learning materials used by the team—including mats, cushions, books, games, puzzles, dollhouses, figurines, and costumes—are sourced from Aboriginal suppliers and decorated with Aboriginal designs. Families are encouraged to link in with the suppliers to purchase further learning materials for their homes.

Each playgroup is also offered funding, expertise and time to produce their own tailored books. During Gumala's partnership with World Vision Australia, the organisation produced cultural resources—primarily reading materials with local photographs and paintings—for distribution to each playgroup.



THE PROGRAM'S POSITIVE IMPACT

"The benefits of 3a [are] that in previous research projects in America and the Northern Territory, you see the benefits all the way through the completing of Year 12, going on to further study, getting good jobs, those sorts of things"

Gumala 3a team member

The success of the 3a Gumala Playgroups program is measured primarily through the stories of the playgroups' children and families, as these convey the full range of benefits experienced by participants. At the end of each term, the playgroups produce reports that include the stories and photographs of its participants as well as their key achievements, while funding reports include stories of celebration as well as case studies of individual children's improvements, enrolment and attendance numbers, parents' feedback, and responses from teachers when children enter formal schooling.

Playgroup facilitators also record the anecdotal evidence that they frequently hear from parents and local kindergarten and preschool teachers. Parents often speak about how attending playgroups has made them feel supported and encouraged in their child-rearing journeys while teachers point out the noticeable positive changes in children after attending 3a playgroups.

"The feedback that I'm getting from staff and families is the social and emotional improvements that they notice in the children, such as becoming more confident, becoming more independent, settling into routines, interacting positively with other children, and these things improving from when [the children] first started [with the 3a playgroup]"

Gumala 3a team member

Quantitative data is used less frequently to show the playgroups' successes because it offers a limited story. However, a recent internal survey, conducted across the six communities, indicates that parents/caregivers have noticed improvements in their children's developments across all five AEDC domains after starting at playgroup.

To date, there has not yet been a formal evaluation of the Gumala 3a playgroups program.

UPSCALING PROGRAM SUCCESS

Engaging families is currently one of the critical elements to the program upscaling its success. As already identified, some ways to improve engagement are by securing permanent locations for all playgroup sites and being able to fund transport services to/from each playgroup. Having the time and resources for team members to undertake promotional and outreach activities is a third pathway.

In the smaller communities, team members already visit families at their homes and engage these families in conversations about the benefits of the program and the 3a methodology, as well as identify and work through any misconceptions. This personal approach and speaking individually to people are helping playgroup teams to build trusting relationships where parents/caregivers feel comfortable enough to try out a playgroup session. This can be a big step for Aboriginal people who are suspicious of formal services or who did not attend playgroups or kindergartens when they were children.

"In Marble Bar, the two people that ... run the playgroup there, they are local Aboriginal people who have grown up, live in Marble Bar, been there all their life. So, it's them going out and talking to families and everyone's related, so they're trying to encourage families to engage"

Gumala 3a team member

"[At the smaller sites], how we're going to improve it is that personal approach or staff going out and speaking individually to people and trying to get people coming along, and it's building the relationships with families to make them feel comfortable to come there in the first place. It's a big step [for families] as well"

Gumala 3a team member

In the larger communities, the playgroup team regularly promotes the program through their networks, puts fliers up at schools, and advocates for the program through schools' newsletters and on social media.

"[We're] working with other agencies to try and engage and promote the centre as much as possible in each location. It's also working with agencies like health services, so population health, child health, nurses, and when they see families, to recommend and promote a playgroup as well ... there's a lot of networking"

Gumala 3a team member

The team have found that one of the barriers to engagement is the requirement that parents attend sessions with their children. One way to address this would be to evaluate and identify trends of why parents/caregivers are hesitant to engage – with reasons potentially ranging from parents feeling that other families will judge their parenting, the location is too far from their home, the day of the week does not suit the family schedule, suspicion or lack of confidence to engage with formal programs, to not understanding the benefits of the 3a approach. From here, an engagement strategy would support the team to address both these barriers and better promote the program and its benefits amongst the communities.

The program team already recognises that to overcome hesitancy, they need to promote the importance of the 3a approach. This includes explaining that the first three years are critical for the child's healthy brain development, language development and educational engagement. Families' attendance at these supported playgroups, and parents/caregivers being able to implement the 3a approach in the home, then becomes an invaluable way to support their child's development and education journey.

ENDNOTES

1. Roughly encompassing the area between the Fortescue River and Ashburton River valleys.
2. Melbourne Graduate School of Education University of Melbourne 2021, *3a – Abecedarian Approach* Australia website.
3. Ibid.
4. For example, refer to Brookes, I & Tayler, C 2016, 'Effects of an Evidence-based Intervention on the Australian English Language Development of a Vulnerable Group of Young Aboriginal Children', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 41(4), pp. 4–15.
5. Page, J, Cock, ML, Murray, L, Eadie, T, Niklas, F, Scull, J & Sparling J 2019, 'An Abecedarian Approach with Aboriginal Families and Their Young Children in Australia: Playgroup Participation and Developmental Outcomes', *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 51, pp. 233–250.
6. Ibid.
7. Sincovich, A, Harman-Smith, Y & Brinkman, S 2019 'The reach of playgroups and their benefit for children across Australia: A comparison of 2012, 2015, and 2018 AEDC data', *Research Report*, Telethon Kids Institute, pp. 20–28.
8. Gumala 2021 *3a Playgroups Early Learning Program 0-4 years* webpage.
9. The Karratha playgroup provides a bus service through a partnership with the Graham (Polly) Farmer Foundation.
10. *Act Belong Commit* Mentally Healthy WA website.

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