

THE VALUE OF PEER SUPPORT GROUPS.



Down Syndrome Victoria has been coordinating MyTime peer support groups for the past 7 years, in both Melbourne and rural Victoria. While these groups have been open to families with children with a range of disabilities, there are some groups where the focus has been more strongly on a single disability. There are pros and cons to these 2 models.

Autism specific and Down syndrome specific groups have established naturally, either from existing informal groups or from people with “like” issues and concerns banding together to support each other, and then others gravitating to those groups. Peer support groups for specific disabilities are unlikely to be funded through the current MyTime model in multiple locations; however, there could be an argument for locating “like” groups within larger catchment areas. For example: a Down syndrome support group in the east, west, south and north of Melbourne and similarly an autism, cerebral palsy or sensory needs support group in each region. Larger regional towns could also support more than one group with the type of disability being the focus. While there is value in shared ideas and information across the various disabilities, it seems the strongest groups are those where the families have much more common experiences. The issues for people with physical disabilities are usually quite different to those for children who have intellectual disabilities or autism.

The capacity for MyTime to support families of children with chronic medical needs has also been limited. Many of these families don't see their children as having disabilities, in the usual sense of the word. Their children are also very vulnerable; susceptible to infection or injury from other children. The environment in which these families meet needs to be able to support the medical needs and the Facilitator and play helpers need to have more specific skills. Parents are often unable to attend support groups in their local communities, due to the numerous appointments, hospitalizations, and illnesses their children experience, and the central nature of the hospitals. I would suggest a support group for these families were located in the major children's hospitals – RCH and Monash – with better access to medical support and staff who understand the families' needs.

The provision of Play helpers to support children is a major factor in the success of MyTime groups, enabling parents to connect together, knowing their children are being cared for in a safe environment. Some groups have need of several play helpers depending on numbers of children and the type of supports they need.

To date, MyTime groups have established in an ad hoc way, depending on service provider agencies in the area and the requests for or willingness to take on a group. There is value in having local providers with local knowledge and expertise in disability service provision.