

Early Years Strategy Submission

April 2023



About toy libraries

A toy library enables families to borrow a large variety of educational toys, games, puzzles, and equipment in a process like that of a book library. These toys suit children aged from birth to primary school and beyond. Toy Libraries Australia's members have a specific focus on promoting the educational value of play for younger children, encouraging positive adult/child interactions through play, and creating strong community connections in a setting that encourages the sustainable use of resources.

There are 380 toy libraries across Australia, with over 130,000 people using a toy library each year. Our member toy libraries operate in a variety of formats and settings, but most are community organisations run primarily by volunteers.

Our perspectives on the early years

Although each toy library is a unique reflection of its local community, Australian community toy libraries are all working from a common set of perspectives on what is important in the early years.

Young children learn through playⁱ

Play is crucial to children's healthy development and quality of life. From very early childhood, play is one of the most important mechanisms for children to connect with the world. Whilst playing, children pick up and hone a variety of skills and behaviours. Because playing is usually a positive experience it can also help children deal with stress and trauma. It is important both for children's immediate experience and as a way of gathering knowledge, skills and understanding for the future. Play, therefore, is an essential part of normal childhood development, helping children develop and display a 'sense of themselves'.

Children's earliest learning, development and wellbeing takes place through relationships within families, who are children's first and most influential educatorsⁱⁱ

Children's learning, development and wellbeing is inextricably linked to their family circumstances and the connections they form with their family. The capacity of a family to support their children's early development is influenced by a combination of their own personal resources, parenting skills, and their material circumstances. However, these resources and skills are not innate – most parents and carers need to learn how they can best support their child.

Home learning environments play a profoundly important role in the development of young childrenⁱⁱⁱ

A positive home learning environment has benefits for young children's cognitive, social and physical development over and above the effect of socio-demographic factors such as parent education and family income^{iv}. By providing toys and resources to support play, and by encouraging families to play together, toy libraries make a significant contribution to enhancing the home learning environment.

For families to thrive they need to be connected with, supported by, and contribute to their community^v

The social, economic, cultural, and environmental characteristics of a child's community provides important foundations for their development. Factors found to support a health community for early childhood development include active community organisations, engaged parents and families, and the availability and diversity of family-friendly destinations. There is also emerging evidence that local leadership and that locally tailored initiatives are also important in building social capital in communities that are doing well.

Our vision for the Australia's youngest children

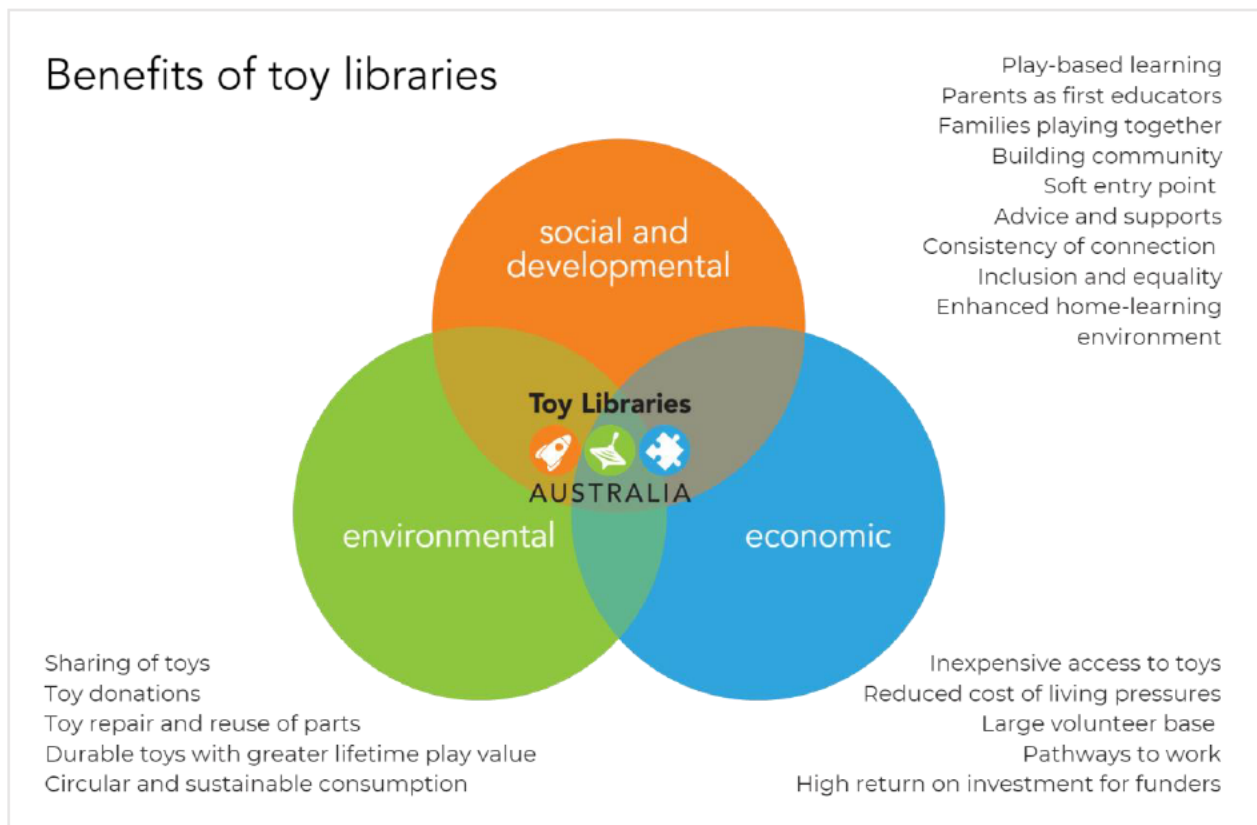
Combining the above perspectives, our suggested vision is:

Young Australians are happy, playful, and thriving within caring families who are supported by a community that values children and childhood

Benefits of toy libraries

Toy libraries have social, developmental, economic and environmental benefits for our community.

Figure 1



Role of toy libraries in the early years system

Some of the social and developmental benefits shown in figure 1 were previously discussed, including the importance of play-based learning, parents as first educators, families playing together and the home-learning environment. However, some of the other benefits talk to the unique role played by toy libraries in the early years system that could be further enhanced.

Toy libraries fill a gap in the early years systems between the new parents groups and child and health nurse visits during the first few months of a child's life, and the formal play-based early education available to 3 and 4 year olds. As is noted in the discussion paper, this is the time when there is the most opportunity to shape the outcomes for children, but it is also the time when there are the least universal services for families (outside of childcare that used by less than half of 0-2 year olds)^{vi}.

Toy libraries provide a flexible way for all new parents to meet and support each other. For those struggling getting used to life with young children, the toy library is a friendly outing with no expectations. You can pop in when you feel like it, pick up some toys and have a chat. Over time, toy library members create bonds with the toy librarians, volunteers, and other members, creating new friendships and support networks. Parents and caregivers can get advice about play based learning and understand what is expected at different ages and stages.

For parents and carers with concerns about the wellbeing of their child or themselves, but not wanting to engage with professionals, they can find someone to talk to about their worries. This peer support doesn't replace professional advice, but it does help people feel less alone and often helps answer the 'is this normal' questions for those who may not have a local family and friends support network. Toy libraries often know what supports are available in their community and can share this information with members.

For families who have a child with a disability (or are trying to get a diagnosis) toy libraries are a stable mainstream connection that are always there no matter what else is happening in a family's life. Regardless of the child's current eligibility status for the NDIS, the family can continue to get support at the toy library. Families will never hear 'I can't help you' or 'you aren't eligible' for toy library services. Toy libraries will accept families as they are and where they are, building on their strengths.

The ability of toy libraries to deliver on these benefits varies. Many toy libraries currently run without any paid staff. For these toy libraries, the focus of the volunteer committee is often on the financial viability and basic lending operations of the toy library. As toy libraries grow and employ staff, there is greater opportunity to provide training for the toy librarian on child development, more time for the toy library to create strong networks within the community, and more capacity to deliver other community building activities beyond toy lending. Funding as little as \$10K per annum can support hundreds of families at a toy library.

Outcomes

Toy Libraries Australia agrees with the outcomes stated in the discussions paper, however, we'd like to propose additional outcomes.

Protects and promotes the Rights of the Child

At a minimum, an Early Years Strategy should meet Australia's obligations on the Right of the Child, including Article 31 which articulates a child's right to play.

Society values children and childhood

Much of the discourse around early years policy is predicated on economics, such as the increase in GDP from mothers returning to the workforce or the financial savings to the budget of early intervention. Although these outcomes are important, this narrative does not value children and childhood for its own sake, rather it positions children's value relative to the economic interests of adults.

The Early Years Strategy needs to value children for who they are now and allow childhood to be playful and carefree, in addition to providing them with a good start to life. Children need to be welcomed within all aspects of our society. The treatment of some breastfeeding mothers and calls for child-free planes or restaurants suggests we have a way to go in creating a society welcoming for children.

Policy priorities

Toy Libraries Australia would like to propose the following priorities for the Early Years Strategy:

Strengthening early years community and volunteer-run organisations, including toy libraries

Community organisations have an important role to play as soft entry points to the early years system (particularly in the first 1000 days) and can respond quickly to specific local needs. Because of their large volunteer base, they create significant community value for little cost. It is important that the role of community organisations, including toy libraries, is specifically recognised in the strategy and policies are in place to ensure their sustainability. Most toy libraries 'run on the smell of an oily rag' (or on the back of Bunnings BBQs), which limits their ability to focus on quality of service to members. Small amounts of ongoing funding can create organisational resilience, reducing the likelihood that volunteer run toy libraries falter when key volunteers leave and providing consistency for members.

Early years hubs

The early years system is difficult to navigate, especially for first time parents. Physical hubs with 'no wrong door' that brings together early years education and care, health, social services and community supports for families would make the service system easier to navigate.

Toy libraries located within early years hubs have seen incredible increases in their memberships, however, all too often toy libraries are not engaged early enough in the development process to ensure the space meets their requirements or are offered spaces at commercial rates.

Gender equality in parenting

The strategy should address barriers to fathers being equal partners in parenting, including uptake of paid parental leave and rigid societal gender expectations. Toy libraries can play an important role, actively encouraging fathers to play with their children and role modelling health masculinities through play.



References

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ⁱⁱⁱ Moore, T.G. and Arefadib, N, (2022) Tasmanian Play2Learn+ Trial: Evidence Review. Prepared for the Australian Government Department of Social Services. Centre for Community Child Health, Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, Parkville, Victoria. <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.21521250>

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^{vi} Department of Education. (2022). Data on Families and Children in Child Care). www.education.gov.au/child-care-package/resources/june-quarter-2021