

## 2024 Queensland State election

16 February 2024

### Fight the cost-of-living pressures for Queensland families with toy libraries

Cost-of-living pressures are having a significant impact on Queensland families, particularly those on low incomes and in the regions. Rising fuel, utility and grocery prices, rent increases and other factors are forcing many families into financial hardship, with some parents even going to sleep hungry to ensure their children have enough to eat<sup>1</sup>. In this tough environment, parents are buying less toys<sup>2</sup>, leaving children missing out on important play and development opportunities.

#### Toy Libraries support parents to be children's first educators

The consultation draft of Putting Queensland Kids First acknowledges that the first 1000 days of a child's life is a unique period of rapid development.

**'80% of brain development occurs before a child is 3 years old'**<sup>3</sup>

In these earliest years, children develop best by forming secure attachments in nurturing and stimulating environments that enable them to explore and make sense of their world.

**'Time spent playing... and practising what they are learning with the important adults in their life is essential for a child's healthy development.'**<sup>4</sup>

Researchers and educators agree that the home learning environment makes an independent and substantial impact on children's development. The availability of resources that facilitate learning (such as toys, games, books), children's active engagement, and the quality of parent/caregiver-child interactions are core features of a rich home learning environment<sup>5</sup>. Toy libraries help parents create a playful learning environment at home, by providing access to high quality education toys.

But toy libraries do so much more than just support parents as a child's first educator. They **create community** and **support networks** for parents with young children, provide **volunteering pathways** to employment for mothers looking to return to the workforce, and they have followed **circular economy** principles for decades.



Hon Amanda Rishworth MP, Federal Minister for Social Services at the opening of the Toy Well toy library at Paralowie R-12 School Community Hub, Adelaide

<sup>1</sup> QCOSS. (December, 2022). Living affordability in Queensland.

<sup>2</sup> Guardian Australia. (February, 2023) Baby Bunting profit crashes as parents forgo toys in cost-of-living crisis <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/feb/17/baby-bunting-profit-crashes-as-parents-forego-toys-in-cost-of-living-crisis>

<sup>3</sup> Queensland Government. (2024). Putting Queensland Kids First, Giving our kids the opportunity of a lifetime

<sup>4</sup> Queensland Government. (2020). A great start for all Queensland children.

<sup>5</sup> Rodriguez, E., & Tamis-LeMonda, C. S. (2011). Trajectories of the home learning environment across the first five years: Associations with children's language and literacy skills at Pre Kindergarten. *Child Development*, 82(4), 1058-1075.

## Queensland families are missing out on toy libraries

Queensland only has 25 toy libraries<sup>6</sup>. This compares to 131 toy libraries in Victoria, 82 in Western Australia and 45 in South Australia. So, in Queensland there is 8 toy libraries per 100,000 children under 5 compared to 38 in Victoria, 48 in Western Australia and 36 in South Australia.

Most Queensland toy libraries are based in the larger regional centres, with few toy libraries in remote communities and the high-population areas of SE Queensland. In the 1990s Playgroup Queensland ran nearly fifty toy libraries across the state, however lack of support and an unsustainable business model has resulted in most of these toy libraries closing.

We urge all parties to make toy libraries a key pillar of their early years policy and support the re-establishment of toy libraries in Queensland.

This can be achieved through **\$4.2 million over the next four years to :**

1	<b>Establish 50 new toy libraries within every Early Years Place and FamilyLinQ hub</b> , integrating toy libraries within the existing service infrastructure and attracting new families into the spaces.
2	<b>Fund a toy libraries annual grant program</b> to establish new toy libraries in areas without an Early Years Place and support existing toy libraries through the purchase of toys, operational costs, venue refurbishment and training.
3	<b>Expand the Play Stars program for children under one to include toy libraries</b> so that all families, including those with working parents who cannot attend playgroup during the week, have the resources and opportunity to play with their child.
4	Deliver <b>peak body funding</b> to allow Toy Libraries Australia (TLA) to provide leadership and capacity building support for not-for-profit toy libraries in Queensland to ensure the sustainability and quality of toy libraries in Queensland.



Rebekah, 3, and friends enjoy playing with the huge variety on offer at the Canterbury Toy Library, which has seen a membership boom. Picture: David Caid

### Toy libraries now a big hit with parents

Lily McCaffrey  
Victoria's toy libraries have skyrocketed in popularity, with a 70 per cent increase in memberships in the last year. Louise Bell, national development officer for peak body Toy Libraries Australia, said parents wanted to make sure their children didn't miss out on the excitement toys bring despite cost-of-living pressures. "By joining a toy library, they can give their children access to hundreds of high-quality toys without worrying about the price tag," she said. There are 131 toy libraries across the state, holding \$7m worth of toys. At the Canterbury Toy Library in Melbourne's east, membership numbers are up 185 per cent from January. Manager Helen Dudley said she thought cost-saving and sustainability were the main reasons behind the boom. "People are seeing just how much waste there is and they see the benefit of sharing toys in a fun and safe environment where they don't have the burden of rehomeing toys every six months when their kids outgrow them," she said. Her library has 1720 toys worth more than \$100,000. Membership costs \$180, which is reduced to \$100 if members volunteer.



Coverage of toy library membership growth in Victoria, November 2023

<sup>6</sup> Excludes small toy collections in book libraries

## Benefits

### Reducing the cost of living

With high inflation, parents are increasingly having to choose between putting food on the table and paying the bills. This means quality and age-appropriate toys become 'nice to haves' for many families. For others, buying toys and keeping up with age and peer influenced requirements is putting a real strain on families. This initiative will generate an equitable approach to all children being able to borrow the toys that are right for them, reducing stigma and setting all children up to succeed. With a typical toy library membership costing less than \$2 week, supporting toy libraries offers meaningful support to families.

### Supporting early childhood development

This initiative will increase the number of young Queenslanders learning through play. Play is necessary for children to develop and increase their language and early literacy skills, as well as their social and emotional wellbeing (such as self-regulation and resilience). Play is recognised as a fundamental human right in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Play is the lens through which children experience their world, and the world of others. It is through play that children organise and make meaning of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representation. Play is fun for children and fun for parents!

### Pathways to employment through volunteering

Many people start their journey (back) into the workforce through volunteering at a toy library. Many migrants volunteer at the toy library to improve their English skills and get local work experience. Some community members with additional needs enjoy coming to the toy library and helping check that toys are complete or checking toys out for members. For mothers who left the workforce when they had their first child, being on a toy library committee gives them new and recent skills that helps them transition back into the workforce.

### New parent networks

Toy libraries provide a flexible way for 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. These networks are critical to support the mental wellbeing of parents.

### Circular economy

Toy libraries are the most environmentally sustainable way to provide children with high quality educational toys. Toys purchased for a toy library are durable, resulting in hundreds of families playing with one toy over many years, while toy donations provide a second life for toys or parts of toys that might otherwise end up in landfill. Toy libraries repair toys or reuse parts of toys that are broken, further reducing the environmental impact. Being a toy library member also provides a practical opportunity to teach children about sustainability and sharing of resources.



Leading Queensland toy libraries: (L-R) Townsville, Brisbane South, Kath Dickson (Toowoomba)

## Costings<sup>7</sup>

This proposal would cost on average of \$1.05m per annum over 4 years.

	2024-25	2025-26	2026-27	2027-28	Total
1. Establish 50 new toy libraries within existing Early Years Places	272,900	452,200	465,800	479,800	1,670,700
2. Fund a toy libraries annual grant program	420,000	420,600	421,200	421,900	1,683,700
3. Expand the Play Stars program	120,000	123,600	127,300	131,100	502,000
4. Peak body funding	83,000	85,500	88,100	90,700	347,300
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>895,900</b>	<b>1,081,900</b>	<b>1,102,400</b>	<b>1,123,500</b>	<b>4,203,700</b>

### 1. Establish 50 new toy libraries within every Early Years Place and FamilyLinQ hub

This initiative would build on the existing infrastructure that is already funded by the Queensland Government to quickly roll out toy libraries across the state, with priority given to regional and remote communities currently without a toy library. These smaller toy libraries would be based on the successful Toy Well model ([www.toywell.org.au](http://www.toywell.org.au)), which has already been established in 18 school-based Community Hubs Australia sites across the country.

Located in lower socio-economic communities, Toy Well toy libraries are free services run by local volunteers, supported by the existing leadership within the hubs and training and guidance from Toy Libraries Australia employed regional coordinators from the local community. The toy library becomes a soft entry point for young families to engage with hub services and an opportunity for hub staff to create connections with these families. The toy library also provides pathways to employment, by developing the work-ready skills and confidence of volunteers and employing volunteers into regional coordinator roles.

The hub-based toy library is designed to meet the local community's needs while fitting in the existing infrastructure. These toy libraries can support 50-100 families. Many Toy Well toy libraries are run out of two lockable cupboard that require a small footprint but provide easy access to the toys.

The cost of this initiative includes \$10,000 per site for toys, storage, computers and equipment, 50 hours per week of regional coordinators located across the state to support the toy libraries, 0.8 FTE program lead plus travel and operating costs.

### 2. Annual grant program to establish and grow toy libraries

An annual grant program would support the establishment of larger community-led toy libraries in communities without an Early Years Place or existing toy library, and support existing toy libraries to grow.

We propose the following elements to a grant program (based on a recent [toy library grants](#) program established by the Victorian government)

- Establishment of 5 new toy libraries p.a. @ \$40K each, with at least two toy libraries to be in regional communities
- 20 grants p.a. for existing toy libraries @ \$10K each
- \$20,000 p.a. for grants to fund travel for toy library training to address barriers faced by rural and remote Queenslanders.

<sup>7</sup> Includes CPI indexation of 3% p.a.

### **3. Expand the Play Stars program for children under one to include toy libraries**

The Queensland Government currently provides \$800,000 per year to fund free playgroup for children under 1. This initiative would extend the Play Stars to include free access to toy libraries for families with a child between 6 months and 1 year.

With many parents going back to work earlier, playgroups do not always fit into the hectic weeks of working parents. Toy libraries provide an opportunity for all families to play together in a time and place that suits them, while still making connections with their community and supporting their child's development.

Because there is not complete coverage of toy libraries across Queensland, we propose piloting the initiative with a cap of 1,000 membership per year. The total cost includes \$105 per membership plus \$15,000 p.a. to administer the program.

### **4. Deliver peak body funding to allow Toy Libraries Australia (TLA) to provide leadership and capacity building for NFP toy libraries in Queensland.**

Toy Libraries Australia currently has one member development officer working 15 hours a week supporting the east coast of Australia. This funding would support TLA to employ a staff member dedicated to Queensland to support the establishment of new toy libraries in Queensland, provide training and advice for toy library volunteers, and help government engage with toy libraries and their members.

Volunteer-run toy libraries thrive when they have the support of an adequately resourced organisation that provides oversight and assistance<sup>8</sup>. The benefits of a strong peak body were shown during COVID – Toy Libraries Australia (TLA) used Victorian state government COVID funding to develop DHS approved COVID guidelines and plans that were specific to toy libraries. As a result, many Australian toy libraries had a click and collect lending model operating within 3 weeks of restrictions being in place (well ahead of libraries and similar services).

Peak body funding to Toy Libraries Australia enables communities to develop sustainable and high quality toy libraries. Peak body support to community run toy libraries ensures the strengths of local communities are utilised and the uniqueness of communities are recognised and respected. When toy libraries engage with TLA we see an increase in the confidence and skills within toy libraries and the quality of the toy library including addressing issues such as safety and inclusion are addressed.

The Queensland government provides this form of funding to both Men's Sheds and Neighbourhood Houses.

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<sup>8</sup> Commerford, J., & Hunter, C. (2011). Australian Institute for Family Studies. *Principles for high quality playgroups*.

## ABOUT TOY LIBRARIES

A toy library enables parents and caregivers 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 and encouraging positive adult/child interactions through affordable access to toys on short-term loan.

Our members operate in a variety of formats and in settings that reflect the needs and capacities of their local communities. Toy libraries are generally situated within premises shared with other community services, i.e. early years centres, halls, neighbourhood houses, public libraries, or community centres – with some operating full time and others a few hours a week.

Toy libraries range from small (catering to as few as 20 families in rural towns) - to large (supporting over 1000 families in metro Melbourne and Adelaide). Some toy libraries are employers (nationally they employ 120 toy librarians to manage their operations), but all rely on the assistance of a team of volunteers to operate – over 15,000 volunteers support toy libraries each year in Australia.

Toy libraries are generally operationally self-funding though membership fees, fundraising and corporate sponsorships; although limited grants from philanthropic sources and local government funding enable toy libraries to extend their toy collections and service offerings. We hope toy libraries will become a recognised and funded part of the Queensland early years system, so volunteer time can focus on service delivery rather than fundraising.

Maggie Dent's visit to the Busselton Toy Library (WA) for Join Us in July 2023



## Toy Libraries Australia

### Our vision: all communities can access a quality toy library

Toy Libraries Australia is the national representative body for not-for-profit toy libraries in Australia. Established in 1977, Toy Libraries Australia has grown in its 46-year history to represent 280 toy libraries nationally.

Operating as a not-for-profit incorporated association, Toy Libraries Australia supports a growing community of not-for-profit toy libraries, encouraging families to play and learn together in a sustainable way.

We advocate for play that is unstructured, voluntary, child-led, inclusive and minimises impact on the environment. Toy Libraries Australia also provides ongoing information, support and leadership to its members and prospective toy libraries.

### Queensland toy libraries



Contact details for local toy libraries can be found at [www.toylibraries.org.au/find-a-toy-library](http://www.toylibraries.org.au/find-a-toy-library)

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## Appendix – Locations of existing Early Years Places and proposed Family LinQ hubs

### Early Years Places

#### Far North Queensland (11)

Lockhart River  
Aurukun  
Coen  
Pormpuraaw  
Julatten  
Mareeba  
Dimbulah  
Cairns x4

#### Northern Queensland (9)

Mornington Island  
Doomadgee  
Mount Isa x 2  
Richmond  
Palm Island  
Townsville x 2  
Bowen

#### Central Queensland (4)

Barcaldine  
Blackall  
Rockhampton  
Mount Morgan

#### Darling Downs (3)

Injune  
Tara  
Stanthorpe

#### North Coast Queensland (9)

Childers  
Hervey Bay  
Maryborough  
Gympie  
Woodford  
Caboolture (1 or 4)

#### Metropolitan (8)

Lockwood  
Ipswich  
Bracken Ridge  
Inala  
Acacia Ridge  
Kyabra  
Redlands (2)

#### South East Queensland (9)

Beaudesert  
North Gold Coast (3)  
Robina  
Coolangatta  
Browns Plains  
Logan  
Kingston

### Family LinQ sites

Kingston  
Logan