

STATE ELECTION

July 2022

Equitable access for Victorian families to toy libraries

In Australia, the value of play-based early learning is well understood. We know '90% of a child's brain develops before the age of five, early education has a profound effect on the way children develop'.

Researchers and educators also agree that the home learning environment makes an independent and substantial impact on children's development. The availability of resources that facilitate expression and learning (such as toys, games, books), children's engagement in learning activities, and the quality of parent/caregiver-child interactions are core features of a rich home learning¹. Australian research has shown that the quality of the home learning environment from 0-3 years is linked to cognitive development at age 4-5 years but also with higher reading and numeracy performance in Year 3². Toy libraries help parents create a rich home learning environment, by providing access to high quality education toys.

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

Support for this initiative will make toy libraries more equitable and accessible to families across the state by filling gaps in toy library services in growth corridors, supporting existing toy libraries to recover from the devastating effects of COVID, and providing access to toy libraries for families struggling with the cost of living.

Specifically, one-off funding of \$5.34 million over the next four years will:

1. Deliver **program coordination funding** to allow Toy Libraries Australia (TLA) to provide leadership and capacity building for the 120 toy libraries in Victoria as they recover from the impacts of COVID
2. Fund a **toy libraries annual grant program to establish new toy libraries** and for the purchase of toys and refurbishment of existing toy libraries
3. **Integrate toy libraries into early education centres** by including functional spaces for existing or new toy libraries in growth corridors where there are few toy libraries.
4. Provide a subsidy so that 5,000 families who are struggling with the cost of living and in receipt of a **concession card, can access toy libraries free of charge**
5. Support the establishment of **free Toy Well toy libraries in school-based community hubs for socially disadvantaged children and families, with a particular focus on migrant and refugee families**
6. Allow toy libraries to access **more affordable insurance** through the Victorian Managed Insurance Authority.

¹ Rodríguez, 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.

² Yu, M. & Daraganova, G. (2015). Children's early home learning environment and learning outcomes in the early years of school. In Australian Institute of Family Studies. (pp. 63-79). *The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children Annual Statistical Report 2014*.

THE BENEFITS

Play based learning

This initiative will increase the number of young Victorians 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!

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 other families, 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.

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.

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.

COSTINGS³

This proposal is for a fixed four-year term, at an average of \$1.34m per annum. The components would be implemented as projects that allows for a fixed term approach.

\$	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26	Total
<i>Component 1: Program coordination funding</i>	128,000	131,840	135,795	139,869	535,504
<i>Component 2: Annual grant program</i>	550,000	566,500	583,495	601,000	2,300,995
<i>Component 3: Integrate toy libraries into the early education centres</i>	50,057	51,559	53,106	54,699	209,420
<i>Component 4: Provide access to toy libraries to address cost of living</i>	387,543	399,169	411,144	423,479	1,621,335
<i>Component 5: Establish Toy Well toy libraries in disadvantaged schools</i>	161,576	166,424	171,416	176,559	675,975
<i>Component 6: Affordable insurance</i>	-	-	-	-	-
TOTAL	1,277,176	1,315,492	1,354,956	1,395,605	5,343,230

Component 1: Provide program coordination funding for Toy Libraries Australia

This funding would support TLA employ a Toy Library Development Officer for Victoria. Currently we have one staff member working 8 hours a week supporting all the east coast.

Volunteer-run toy libraries thrive when they have the support of an adequately resourced organisation that provides oversight and assistance⁴. The benefits of a strong peak body were shown during COVID – Toy Libraries Australia (TLA) used state government COVID funding to develop DHS approved COVID guidelines and plans that were specific to toy libraries. As a result, many Melbourne 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). The government provides this form of funding to both Men’s Sheds and Neighbourhood Houses.

Component 2: Annual grant program

An annual grant program would support the establishment of 5 new toy libraries a year, costing \$40K each, in the recently announced new early education centres. It would also provide an opportunity for the 120 Victorian toy libraries to apply for grants for toy purchases or refurbishments from a \$350,000 p.a. grant pool. This program would be structured like the program run for Men’s Sheds.

Component 3: Integrate toy libraries into the early education centres

Early education centres provide an opportunity to establish toy libraries in the peri-urban growth corridors of Melbourne where there are currently very few toy libraries and cost of living pressures are felt most acutely. This funding would support a project officer 2 days a week who would initially develop guidelines for the inclusion of toy libraries within early education centres and support the architects designing the centres to ensure the spaces are functional for toy library use. Once centres are under development, they would recruit and support volunteers to establish the toy libraries as independent community-led organisations responsible for their own sustainability.

Funding for the capital costs of establishing new toy libraries is included in component 2.

³ Includes CPI indexation of 3% p.a.

⁴ Commerford, J., & Hunter, C. (2011). Australian Institute for Family Studies. *Principles for high quality playgroups*.

Component 4: Provide access to toy libraries to address cost of living

Funding would provide free toy library membership for 5,000 concession card holder families to join and access toys from over 120 toy libraries (average membership cost \$70 per family) and one half time program administrator to run the program.

Component 5: Establish Toy Well toy libraries in disadvantaged schools

Toy Well works with local communities to establish free toy lending libraries for children and families experiencing hardship, with a particular focus on migrant and refugee families. They are established at Community Hubs Australia sites located within primary schools. Community Hubs bridge the gap between migrants and the wider community, they connect women with schools, with each other, and with organisations that can provide health, education, and settlement support. Free toy libraries provide a drawcard to attract families into the hub, hopefully leading to the family's further engagement with playgroups and other services. Toy Well is currently available in eight schools in Geelong, Hume, Dandenong, and Wyndham and four more sites are currently in development. This initiative would fund the expansion of Toy Well into four additional schools a year and support the volunteers running the toy libraries by Toy Well regional coordinators, who are also migrant women from their local community. Toy Well is a finalist in the 2022 Victorian Early Years Awards.

Component 6: Affordable insurance

If Toy Libraries Australia has long-term state government funding it will be eligible to access insurance through VMIA, which could significantly reduce the cost of insurance for our toy libraries.

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 500 families in metro Melbourne). 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 through 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.

Toy Libraries Australia

Our vision: all communities can access a quality toy library

Toy Libraries Australia is the Melbourne-based national representative body for not-for-profit toy libraries in Australia. Established in 1977 as Toy Libraries Victoria, Toy Libraries Australia has grown in its 40-year history to represent 260 toy libraries nationally, including 120 in Victoria. More than 34,000 people use Victorian toy libraries each year.

Operating as a not-for-profit Victorian 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-initiated, inclusive and minimises impact on the environment. Toy Libraries Australia also provides ongoing information, support and leadership to its members and prospective toy libraries.

Toy Libraries in Victoria



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