

Toy Libraries Australia submission to the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People 2027–2030

26 June 2026

Toy Libraries Australia (TLA) is the national peak body for not-for-profit toy libraries. Toy libraries support children, parents and carers to play and learn together in a low-cost, sustainable and community-based way. They provide access to high-quality toys, games, puzzles and play resources, while also building parent confidence, strengthening community connection and supporting inclusive participation for children with developmental concerns, delay or disability. There are 53 organisations providing toy library services in 83 communities in NSW.

TLA supports the plan’s ambition to make NSW a better and fairer place for all children and young people. We particularly welcome the focus on children and young people with unmet needs, systemic issues and the voices of children and young people. Our submission aims to highlight the unique needs of pre-school children.

Toy libraries can make a practical contribution across all the plan’s themes. They are existing community infrastructure that supports early learning, community connection, play, inclusion, family capability, health and wellbeing. Toy libraries can help NSW deliver outcomes that are evidence-informed, place-based, preventative and accessible to families.

Theme 1: Educated and thriving

Recognise the impacts of the home learning environment and parental engagement on learning outcomes for preschool children.

The evidence shows that children’s learning starts well before formal education. The Australian Institute of Family Studies found that the quality of the home learning environment during a child’s first three years is associated with cognitive development at age four to five, educational achievement at school and longer-term outcomes. A strong home learning environment includes everyday interactions and activities such as parent-child play, shared reading, singing songs, playing games, arts and crafts, access to children’s books, and outings to places such as libraries, playgrounds, museums and zoos.

The Mitchell Institute’s 2025 report *Unequal from the start: The achievement gap and the early years* reinforces this evidence and highlights why early action is essential. The report found that the achievement gap between children from high and low socioeconomic

backgrounds can emerge by age two to three and widen by school age. Features of the home environment were statistically significant predictors of later achievement including Year 3 NAPLAN results. By contrast, ECEC attendance was not a predictor of later achievement.

These findings show that improving educational outcomes for preschool children requires more than access to formal early childhood services. Families are children’s first and most important educators, and everyday play, reading, talking and learning at home are central to school readiness and later success. Strategies that focus only on formal service systems risk missing one of the strongest levers for improving children’s learning outcomes: supporting parents and carers to create rich learning environments in everyday family life.

Toy libraries are well placed to strengthen the home learning environment. They provide families with affordable access to developmentally appropriate toys, games, puzzles and play resources that many could not otherwise afford. They also support parents and carers to understand the value of play, build confidence in interacting with their child, and create meaningful learning opportunities at home. By allowing families to borrow rather than buy, toy libraries reduce cost barriers while expanding access to high-quality learning materials.

Theme 2: Community connection – Play and create

Explicitly recognise play as broader than sport and formal recreation. It should include actions to protect and expand children’s access to free, inclusive, self-directed play in homes, communities, public spaces and nature.

The subtheme *Play and create* is an important inclusion in the strategy, however, the consultation paper’s framing risks giving too much emphasis to sport, formal programs, arts participation and organised recreation. These are important, but they are not the whole story of play.

Play is not only structured activities, adult-led programs, or paid participation. Children and young people also need time, space and permission for free, self-directed play: play in nature, play in streets and parks, play with friends, imaginative play, risky play, social play, sensory play and play that is chosen by children themselves.

Robyn Monro Miller’s Churchill Fellowship report, *Weaving Play into the National Fabric: To explore international approaches to national play strategies for children’s health and wellbeing*, provides a strong evidence base for this broader approach. The report defines play as a biological imperative for childhood; freely chosen, self-directed and intrinsically motivated. It describes quality play provision as including opportunities for children to interact

with other children, the natural world, loose parts, the elements, challenge and uncertainty, movement, rough and tumble play, changing identity and all the senses.

The Monro Miller report also argues that play is a significant factor in children’s health and wellbeing, brain development, social competence, emotional regulation and community cohesion. It warns that play is too often treated as something that happens only if conditions allow, rather than something communities intentionally cultivate and protect. This is highly relevant to NSW.

Children and young people need playful communities, not only programs. This means neighbourhoods, libraries, schools, parks, community centres, health settings and public spaces should be designed and supported in ways that allow children to play safely, freely and inclusively. It also means that local government, community organisations and families need support to remove barriers to play, including cost, transport, lack of safe spaces, disability exclusion, cultural barriers, excessive risk aversion and limited access to nature.

Toy libraries contribute directly to this broader vision of play. In particular, toy libraries ‘borrow rather than buy’ model directly addresses cost of living pressures that the plan identifies as a barrier to participation in formal sports and recreation. At a cost of around \$2 per week, toy libraries make play more accessible by allowing all families to borrow toys and play resources. They support sustainable consumption by reducing the need for families to purchase toys that may only be used for a short time. They also create community spaces where children and families connect, share knowledge and build belonging.

Theme 3: Supported and safe – Disability services and inclusion

Disability services and inclusion sub-theme must include NSW’s commitments under Thriving Kids and align with the National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention.

TLA is concerned that the consultation paper does not reference Thriving Kids or foundational supports. This is a significant omission. NSW has agreed to deliver new Thriving Kids services for children aged eight and under with developmental delay and/or autism who have low to moderate support needs, with services due to begin from October 2026 and roll out through 2027.

Thriving Kids will be one of the most significant changes to supports for young children with developmental delay and/or autism in NSW over the period of the Strategic Plan. It should therefore be clearly referenced and integrated into the final Plan. Similar foundational supports for children and young people over 9 and expected to emerge after Thriving Kids is established.

Thriving Kids must be implemented in a way that aligns with the *National Best Practice Framework for Early Childhood Intervention*. The Framework emphasises that the early years lay the foundations for later development, health and wellbeing, and that children with developmental concerns, delay or disability and their families need support as early as possible. It calls for family-centred, culturally safe, strengths-based and evidence-informed support delivered by connected and collaborating teams. It also emphasises everyday settings, participation, inclusion, child and family-centred practice, relationships, culture, diversity and building the capability of parents, carers and families.

This alignment is essential. Thriving Kids should not become a narrow clinical or deficit-based program that focuses only on therapy sessions. It should build the capability of families and communities, support participation in everyday settings, and connect families to inclusive mainstream supports. It should help children participate at home, in play, in community settings, in early childhood education and care, and later in school.

The [NSW Child and Family Supports Alliance](#) should be consulted regarding these issues.

4. Theme 4: Healthy and well

Include play as a measurable contributor to children’s health and wellbeing, with actions to expand access to inclusive play resources and community-based play supports.

The strategic plan should explicitly recognise play as a social determinant of health, critical to children and adolescent’s health and wellbeing. Play is not a ‘nice to have’. It supports physical development, movement, coordination, communication, problem-solving, creativity, emotional regulation, resilience, relationships and mental wellbeing.

The Monro Miller report describes play as central to the development of the brain and body, and to children’s ability to develop physical skills, communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, flexible thinking, impulse control, empathy and self-regulation. These are all foundations for health and wellbeing.

Play is also preventative. It can reduce isolation, support social connection, strengthen family relationships and provide children with opportunities to process emotions, test ideas, build confidence and experience joy. For children experiencing disadvantage, disability, stress, trauma, cost-of-living pressure or exclusion, access to play can be protective.

The NSW Strategic Plan should therefore treat play as part of the health and wellbeing infrastructure for children and young people. This includes play in homes, communities, early years settings, schools, healthcare settings and public spaces. It also includes ensuring

children with disability and developmental delay can participate meaningfully in play alongside their peers.

Toy libraries are an effective and low-cost way to support this. They make play affordable, accessible and sustainable. They provide families with the tools to create rich play experiences at home. They also create opportunities for parents and carers to connect with others, reducing isolation and building informal support networks.

TLA recommends that the final Strategic Plan include play as a measurable contributor to children's health and wellbeing, with actions to expand access to inclusive play resources and community-based play supports such as toy libraries and playgroups.

Toy libraries' role in the NSW Strategic Plan for Children and Young People

Explicitly recognise toy libraries in the final strategic plan as cost effective community infrastructure that supports children and families across multiple priority areas.

Toy libraries can make a significant contribution to delivering the plan. They support children to be educated and thriving by strengthening the home learning environment and parent engagement. They build community connection. They support disability inclusion by providing soft-entry, everyday settings for families of children with developmental concerns, delay or disability. They promote health and wellbeing by enabling children and families to experience the developmental, social and emotional benefits of play. They provide agency for even very young children, by providing them choice around how they play.

An independent Social Return on Investment analysis by Think Impact found Australian toy libraries generate exceptional value for money: \$4.22 of social, economic and environmental value for every \$1 invested. Furthermore, there was an incredible \$11 of value for every \$1 of government funding.

Toy libraries are a practical, evidence-informed and cost-effective way for NSW to make communities better, fairer, more playful and more inclusive for children and young people.

TLA welcomes the opportunity to discuss these issues further with the Advocate for Children and Young People and to participate in stakeholder roundtables as the final Plan is developed.

References

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