



Save the Children

TOY WELL

Evaluation Summary



Photos: Robert McKechnie/Save the Children

Purpose

Toy Well piloted a free, volunteer-run toy library service for vulnerable children and their families throughout Victoria. The primary goals of the pilot were:

- to demonstrate that a free toy library can be an effective method for enriching the home learning environment for children facing vulnerability; and
- to demonstrate that a parent/caregiver volunteer-run toy library service can be a sustainable and impactful program model.



The Toy Well pilot was a collaborative partnership between the Trawalla Foundation, Save the Children Australia (SCA), Community Hubs Australia (CHA), Besen Family Foundation and Bennelong Foundation (November 2018-April 2020).

The Toy Well program was piloted at six locations across metro and regional Victoria, within sites that SCA and CHA were delivering existing early childhood initiatives. The pilot was set up for 12 months and then extended for another 6 months, ending in April 2020.

Outcomes

The Toy Well pilot provided a service that addressed a genuine community need. Within a safe and supportive setting, vulnerable Victorian children and families were provided with a range of high-quality educational toys, free of charge. The pilot program reached 378 families and 541 children. The program reached children from 5 months-8 years old, with children aged between 2-4 years old accounting for the majority of children linked to registered families, which were predominantly from culturally and linguistically diverse, migrant and refugee backgrounds. Over the course of the pilot, 1,479 toys were borrowed by families.



Parents and caregivers had multiple reasons for joining the toy libraries such as:

- to save money;
- to access a wide variety of high-quality educational toys; and
- to access a renewable source of new toys.

Parents and caregivers reported improved knowledge of play-based learning as a result of accessing the toy library. Encouragingly, parents and caregivers spoke about the toy library acting as a vehicle for increased connections between children, parents and caregivers and the wider family. Many mothers reported witnessing an increase in father-child play interactions at home, particularly via toys that required scaffolding or role-playing. Other parents perceived the toy library as a tool to keep their child/ren busy so they could attend to household tasks.

The volunteer component of the Toy Well program played a valuable role in not only assisting parent and caregivers from diverse backgrounds to develop stronger connections with other families, but to gain local work experience and key employable skills. In comparison, parents and caregivers who simply loaned and returned toys didn't report an increase in social connection or peer support as a result of the toy library.

Evidence from the evaluation suggests that the Toy Well program complemented and added value to the playgroups it was purposively linked to as it brought a sense of excitement to playgroup. For a small number of facilitators, the Toy Well program provided a soft entry point to information conversations with parents and caregivers which helped build stronger relationships with the families.

While the volunteer-run toy library model was beneficial for the meaningful volunteer opportunities it provided parents and caregivers, the evaluation has highlighted concerns about the long-term sustainability of the model to reach its full potential in creating change for children and families experiencing vulnerability. On-site facilitators were largely overseeing the operations of the toy library in addition to their existing workload, with limited capacity to drive volunteer management and support.



378 Families
accessed the service



541 Children

5 months - 8 years old, with children aged 2-4 years old accounting for the majority of children



1479
toys were borrowed

families, were predominantly from CaLD, migrant and refugee backgrounds



Conclusion

This evaluation has provided valuable insights into how the Toy Well program operates in the current model, the established benefits to children and families, and opportunities to improve its impact for communities facing disadvantage.

Some recommendations based on the aforementioned research and evaluation findings are to provide adequate resourcing for facilitators to lead the program locally, to formalise the parent and caregiver volunteer component, to deliver intentional parent and caregiver education pieces, and to explore the potential of the Toy Well program in universal settings.

Save the Children Australia are grateful for the contributions from the Trawalla Foundation, Besen Family Foundation and Bennelong Foundation to enable the successful delivery of the Toy Well program. The pilot has provided a platform for testing a valuable service for children and parents and caregivers, especially the most vulnerable and disadvantaged who continue to be at the centre of everything we do.



Save the Children

To read the full report visit
<https://www.savethechildren.org.au/about-us/accountability/evaluation-reports>