



Save the Children

Toy Well Pilot

EVALUATION REPORT

April 2020



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Purpose

This evaluation report outlines the context, effectiveness and implications for scale up of the Toy Well program. The report is based on findings from the Toy Well pilot, a collaborative partnership between the Trawalla Foundation, Save the Children Australia, Community Hubs Australia (CHA), Besen Family Foundation and Bennelong Foundation (November 2018-April 2020).

Pilot context

In November 2018, the Trawalla Foundation established a partnership with Save the Children Australia and CHA to pilot a free, volunteer-run toy library service for vulnerable children and their families throughout Victoria. Save the Children Australia and CHA were both engaged as implementation partners due to significant expertise working with communities facing disadvantage using a place-based approach to integrated family support.

The Toy Well program was piloted at six locations across metro and regional Victoria, within sites that Save the Children Australia and CHA were delivering existing early childhood initiatives (Table 1). At each Toy Well site, a shared resource of educational toys was established to promote play-based learning in children's homes, particularly for those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) backgrounds and socially isolated families. Reflective of the benefits of an integrated model of service delivery, the toy libraries were largely connected to an existing Supported Playgroup or Intensive Supported Playgroup that Save the Children Australia and CHA were delivering to families. Parents/caregivers were provided with volunteer opportunities to oversee the toy libraries to build social connections and develop skills to support pathways to future study and employment.

Organisation	SCA			CHA		
Site	Fitzroy	Doveton	Bairnsdale	Dallas Brooks	Geelong North	Dandenong
Location	Connie Benn Centre	Doveton College, Early Learning Centre	East Bairnsdale Community Hub	Dallas Brooks PS Hub	Northern Bay College (NBC) Wexford Hub (main) NBC Hendy Hub and Bell Park PS Hub (outreach)	Dandenong PS Hub
Program commenced	July 2019	March 2019	March 2019	May 2019	June 2019	May 2019

Table 1: Toy well pilot sites

The pilot was governed by a Steering Committee which included representation from the Trawalla Foundation, Besen Family Foundation, Bennelong Foundation (funders), Save the Children Australia (implementing partner) and Toy Libraries Australia (advisory body for Australian toy libraries). The members provided support, strategic guidance and oversight of the pilot progress. Over the duration of the pilot, Save the Children Australia facilitated seven Steering Committee Meetings.

Originally a 12-month pilot due to conclude in November 2019, the Toy Well project cycle was reviewed and adjusted in June 2019. As Toy Well was a new project for Save the Children Australia to develop and implement, there were valuable learnings during the set-up phase in relation to the extent of resourcing required to establish multiple toy library sites simultaneously. To ensure the project sites had enough time to achieve desired pilot outcomes, the Steering Committee agreed to extend the implementation phase of the pilot by six months. As a result, the total duration of the pilot was adjusted to 18 months with a new end date of April 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all toy libraries, including the Toy Well sites, were forced to close on March 25, 2020 in response to the social distancing restrictions put in place by the Victorian Government. As a result, the Toy

Well implementation period was reduced by one month.

The overall reach of the pilot was 378 families and 541 children. In total, five parent/caregiver volunteers, eight parents/caregivers and six facilitators participated in the evaluation of the pilot.

Research base

Power of play

The importance of play in children's lives cannot be underestimated. A child's universal right to play is enshrined in the Convention of Child Rights¹, one of the world's most widely ratified treaties. Save the Children's founder, Eglantyne Jebb penned five directives she believed were the fundamental rights of every child. These later formed the basis for the Convention of Child Rights. A significant body of research draws strong links between play and optimal physical, cognitive, emotional and social development^{2,3,4}. A "natural and universal human impulse", play is a powerful mechanism through which young children engage and interact with the world⁵. By playing with others, children create social groups, safely test out ideas, challenge each other's thinking and build new understandings⁶. Therapeutic play-based interventions have been used effectively to help children cope with traumatic life events⁷ and develop emotional self-regulation skills⁸.

Despite play being fundamental to children's health, wellbeing and development, research has shown that children from disadvantaged families face socioeconomic obstacles that inhibit their right to play^{9,10}. Lower-income families have less resources, including time, to invest in playing.

Playgroup impact

Playgroups offer parents/caregivers with young children an informal and supportive setting to engage in quality play activities with each other and other families. In Australia, it is widely accepted there are three playgroup models; Community Playgroups that are self-managed by parents/caregivers and/or volunteers, Supported Playgroups that are run by a qualified facilitator and Intensive Supported Playgroups that are run by qualified facilitator operating in tandem with family support workers to target the complex of needs of children and families facing vulnerability¹¹. Australian playgroup literature reveals potential benefits associated with playgroup attendance for both children and parents. These include improved learning and social emotional outcomes for children at 4 and 5 years old, particularly for children from disadvantaged families¹². Playgroup participation can also act as a protection factor against poor social support outcomes for socially isolated parents/caregivers¹³, and when located within schools it helps hard-to-reach families form social relationships that are important to a

¹ United Nations General Assembly. (1989). Convention of the Rights of the Child (Article 31).

² Milteer, R. M., Ginsburg, K. R., & Mulligan, D. A. (2012). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bond: Focus on children in poverty. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e204–e213.

³ Galyer, K.T., & Evans, I.M. (2001). Pretend play and the development of emotion regulation in preschool children. *Early Child Development and Care*, 166(1), 93–108.

⁴ Wolfgang, C., Stannard, L., & Jones, I. (2010). Advanced constructional play with LEGOs among preschoolers as a predictor of later school achievement in mathematics. *Early Child Development and Care*, 173(5), 467–475.

⁵ International Play Association. (2016). Children's Right to Play and the Environment. Faringdon, UK: International Play Association. Retrieved from <http://ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/IPA-Play-Environment-Discussion-Paper.pdf>

⁶ Hewes, J. (2014). Seeking Balance in Motion: The Role of Spontaneous Free Play in Promoting Social and Emotional Health in Early Childhood Care and Education. *Children*, 1, 280–301. Retrieved from <http://www.mdpi.com/2227-9067/1/3/280/>

⁷ Fearn, M., Howard, J. (2012). Play as a resource for children facing adversity: An exploration of indicative case studies. *Children & Society*, 26, 456–468.

⁸ Bratton, S. C., Ray, D., Rhine, T., & Jones, C. (2005). The efficacy of play therapy with children: A meta-analytic review of treatment outcomes. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 36(4), 376–390.

⁹ Milteer, R. M., Ginsburg, K. R., & Mulligan, D. A. (2012). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bond: Focus on children in poverty. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e204–e213.

¹⁰ International Play Association. (2016). Children's Right to Play and the Environment. Faringdon, UK: International Play Association. Retrieved from <http://ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/IPA-Play-Environment-Discussion-Paper.pdf>

¹¹ Dadich, A. & Spooner, C. (2008). Evaluating playgroups: An examination of issues and options. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 20(1), 95–104

¹² Hancock, K., Lawrence, D., Mitrou, F., Zarb, D., Berthelsen, D., Nicholson, J., & Zubrick, S. (2012). The association between playgroup participation, learning competence and social-emotional wellbeing for children aged 4-5 years in Australia. *Australian journal of early childhood*. 37, 72–81.

¹³ Hancock, K., Cunningham, N., Lawrence, D., Zarb, D., & Zubrick, R. (2015). Playgroup participation and social support outcomes for mothers of young children: A longitudinal cohort study. *PLoS ONE*, 10(7).

smooth transition to school¹⁴.

Home learning environment

Theorists and practitioners accept 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 learning¹⁵. In Australia, 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 3¹⁶. Further afield, a recent 10-year study in the United States demonstrated that the early home learning environment of children from low-income, ethnically diverse families predicted Grade 5 academic skills¹⁷. Furthermore, toys in the home have been found to support child development primarily when they engage parent/caregivers in shared play experiences rich in language, scaffolding and verbal instruction¹⁸.

Parent/caregiver-child interactions

A substantial research base attests to children thriving in the company of trusting dependable relationships that provide love, security, responsiveness, and encouragement for exploration¹⁹. Children who form secure attachments to one or more adults are more likely to develop a sense of worth and healthy self-confidence which creates a secure base for the child to then explore the world^{20,21}. Playful interactions between a parent/caregiver and young child promotes an emotional bond and connectedness, both enhancing secure attachment for the child²². As they grow older, securely attached children have been found to have increased cognitive ability²³ and can adjust better to school. Consequently, if parents/caregivers are unresponsive and disengaged to their young child's needs, there are negative and long-lasting implications for the child's social-emotional, behavioural and cognitive development.

Integrated models of service delivery

Parenting is a challenging process, particularly for families experiencing life circumstances that can lead to vulnerability (for example those living with poverty, family violence, social isolation, or unemployment). The challenges disadvantaged families face are often multidimensional and inter-connected, requiring more than a single service response²⁴. When family support service delivery is place-based, co-located with integrated services and responsive to local needs, it is more successful in engaging vulnerable communities²⁵ and provides them with the multi-layered support that delivers stronger outcomes for families.

Volunteering

Evidence indicates that people who volunteer are happier and healthier individuals. Across Australia, a significant

¹⁴ McLean, K., Edwards, S., Colliver, Y., & Schaper, C. (2014). Supported playgroups in schools: What matters for caregivers and their children? *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 39(4), 73-80.

¹⁵ 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 PreKindergarten. *Child Development*, 82(4), 1058–1075.

¹⁶ 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*. Retrieved from <https://growingupinaustralia.gov.au/sites/default/files/asr2014.pdf>

¹⁷ Tamis-LeMonda, C., Luo, R., McFadden, K., Bandel, E., & Vallotton, C. (2019). Early home learning environment predicts children's 5th grade academic skills, *Applied Developmental Science*, 23:2, 153-169.

¹⁸ Healey, A., Mendelsohn, A., and Council on Early Childhood (2019). Selecting appropriate toys for young children in the digital era. *Pediatrics* 143: e20183348.

¹⁹ Phillips, D.A. & Shonkoff, J.P. (2000). *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: the science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

²⁰ Werner E. (1993). Risk, resilience and recovery: perspectives from the Kauai longitudinal study. *Development and Psychopathology*, 5, 503–515.

²¹ Zeanah, C. H., Berlin, L. J., & Boris, N. W. (2011). Practitioner review: Clinical applications of attachment theory and research for infants and young children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 52(8), 819–833.

²² Booth, P., & Winstead, M. (2015b). Theraplay: Creating secure and joyful attachment relationships. In O'Connor, K., Schaefer, C., & Braverman, L. (Eds.). 165-194. *Handbook of Play Therapy*, 2nd Edition. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons. Retrieved from <http://www.pthomgroup.com/sites/default/files/my%20library/Handbook%20of%20Play%20Therapy.pdf>

²³ Van IJzendoorn, M. H., & Van Vliet-Visser, S. (1988). The relationship between quality of attachment in infancy and IQ in kindergarten. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology: Research and Theory on Human Development*, 149(1), 23–28.

²⁴ Reupert, A. & Maybery, D. (2014). Practitioners' experiences of working with families with complex needs. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 21.

²⁵ McArthur, M., & Thomson, L. (2011). Families' views on a coordinated family support service. *Family Matters*, 89, 71-81.

number of volunteers regularly report positive changes as a result of their volunteering efforts²⁶. These changes have been found to include stronger connections to their local community, in addition to increased wellbeing and improved mental health²⁷. In addition to these benefits, volunteering can help people from diverse backgrounds who face barriers to paid employment, particularly those newly arrived to Australia, to gain local work experience and build key employable skills²⁸.

Program logic

To guide the development and implementation of Toy Well, a program logic was developed that was grounded in the evidence mentioned above, when working with vulnerable families (Appendix 1).

The two primary goals of the pilot were:

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

Activities

In order to accomplish the outcomes outlined in the Program Logic, four main activities were delivered:

1. Provision of a free, quality toy lending service to targeted families

At each site, a toy library was established with an average inventory of 120 toys. The resources selected were rich in educational value (largely, open-ended toys to encourage creative play) and suitable for children aged 6 months – 4 years old.

The toys were procured through various sources to ensure cost effectiveness while maintaining high standards of quality. Corporate partnerships brokered with St Kilda Mums, Zimblr Toys, Hasbro and Disney resulted in significant in-kind support. This was supplemented with organisational-wide toy drives through Save the Children Australia and the Trawalla Foundation, in addition to the purchase of new toys.

All toys were catalogued, tagged, cleaned if necessary, and packaged into individual storage containers. To assist with this time-intensive task, corporate volunteers from Save the Children Australia, the Trawalla Foundation, BDO Australia, and Mondelez generously assisted the Toy Well team.

Photo (right): The Geelong North Toy Well space



²⁶ Volunteering Australia. (2016). State of Volunteering in Australia. Canberra, Australia: Volunteering Australia.

²⁷ Benevolent Society. (2016). Volunteer Family Connect: A snapshot of the research findings. Internal report.

²⁸ Volunteering Australia & Settlement Council of Australia. (2019). Volunteering and Settlement in Australia. Canberra, Australia: Volunteering Australia. Retrieved from <https://www.volunteeringaustralia.org/wp-content/uploads/Volunteering-and-Settlement-in-Australia-May-2019.pdf>

Through a Department of Health and Services Volunteering Digital Literacy and Technology Readiness grant, the SETLS database system was utilised for all Toy Well sites²⁹. This enabled the process of signing up new members, borrowing and returning toys to be automated online. There was no cost to families to join the toy library and no fines for lost pieces or broken toys.

Across all Toy Well locations, an on-site facilitator was engaged to oversee the local toy lending service and management of parent/caregiver volunteers. Within the CHA sites, the Toy Well facilitators were Hub Leaders already employed by the Department of Education and Training Victoria. Across the Save the Children Australia sites, the facilitators were Early Childhood practitioners already employed by Save the Children Australia to deliver Intensive Supported Playgroups (Play2Learn or Supported Playgroups with *smalltalk*). At Fitzroy, the Toy Well facilitator was also an Early Childhood practitioner but employed by Save the Children Australia to deliver an existing City of Yarra toy library service that was purposively revamped under the guidance of the Toy Well team.

The program was designed to be a place-based initiative that could be easily tailored to the needs of the local community and accommodate any restraints of the project site setting. Evidence of this is in the variety of ways the toy library service was delivered across the sites (Table 2). In Doveton, Dandenong, Bairnsdale, and Geelong North, the toy libraries were purposively connected to an existing Supported Playgroup or Intensive Supported Playgroup that Save the Children Australia or CHA (including partner organisation Bethany Group) were delivering to families. In these sites, membership to the toy library was open **only** to families accessing the playgroups. In Dallas Brooks, the toy library was available the wider Hub community, including playgroup and kindergarten families. Finally, in Fitzroy, the toy library was open to all City of Yarra families, with a focus on those accessing services at the Connie Benn Centre (e.g., Maternal Health Nurse, playgroups, day-care, kindergarten etc). The Geelong North site was further differentiated as it encompassed three mini sites. While Northern Bay College (NBC) Wexford Hub housed the physical toy library, Hub Leaders from NBC Hendy Hub and Bell Park Primary School Hub also accessed the toy library to deliver an outreach service to their Hub families.

Site	Fitzroy	Doveton	Bairnsdale	Dallas Brooks	Geelong North	Dandenong
Toy library space	Entrance foyer	Community room	Standalone room	Consulting room	Storage room	School hall
Membership model	Open to City of Yarra	Playgroups only	Playgroup only	Open to Hub	Playgroups only	Playgroup only
Playgroup model	N/A	Intensive supported playgroups (capped no. of families)	Intensive supported playgroup (capped no. of families)	Supported playgroups	Supported playgroups (including via The Bethany Group)	Supported playgroup

²⁹ The Toy Well SETLS sites can be accessed here:

<https://dandenongtoywell.setls.com.au>
<https://northgeelongtoywell.setls.com.au>
<https://dallastoywell.setls.com.au>
<https://bairnsdaletoywell.setls.com.au>
<https://dovetontoywell.setls.com.au>
<https://stctoylibrary.setls.com.au>

Toy library open	1 session p/w	3 sessions p/w	1 session p/w	2 sessions p/w	1 session p/w (Wexford) 1 session per fortnight (Bell Park/Hendy)	1 session p/w
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Table 2 (above): Site differences in toy library space, membership model, playgroup model and number of sessions

2. Verbal education to building of parent/caregiver capabilities, confidence and knowledge of play-based learning

All facilitators and parents/caregivers interested in volunteering were provided with a two-hour Toy Well induction training. A total of seven training sessions were conducted over the course of the pilot, with attendance from 17 facilitators and other staff members and 35 parents/caregivers. The training incorporated content around play-based learning, the role educational toys can play in enriching children’s play experiences at home, and implications for healthy child development. Ongoing coaching and mentoring were provided to facilitators and parents/caregiver volunteers as required.

The parent/caregiver volunteers were encouraged to use their knowledge of play-based learning to support other parents/caregivers to see the value of becoming a member of the toy library and to be able to select appropriate toys for their children. Facilitators were also encouraged to model to parents/caregivers how to play with specific toys and to highlight the value in spending quality play time with their children at home. Where possible, the Toy Well team would visit sites and model to parents/caregivers how to support their child’s play with resources from the toy library and how to make developmentally appropriate choices when selecting and using toys at home.

3. Provision of a safe and supportive environment for targeted families

The toy libraries were established within Hubs, playgroups and community centres due to the families already having a strong sense of safety in these environments due to the relationships with facilitators and other families attending the space.

Potential barriers to engagement with the toy lending service were addressed in the free-cost membership model and decision to have no financial penalties for lost/damaged toys. All efforts were made to ensure the promotional materials were translated into the prominent languages spoken by community members accessing each toy library site. This was particularly appreciated by the Karen community in Corio (NBC Wexford Hub) as the Karen language isn’t commonly used in printed resources from other service providers. Where possible, bi-cultural language assistants were also utilised to ensure the volunteer training opportunities could be accessed by parents/caregivers most at risk of social isolation.

4. Opportunities for parent/caregiver volunteers to oversee the toy library

The Toy Well program was underpinned by the notion that a toy library is a communal space based on reciprocity that extends beyond the sharing of toys. Parents/caregivers were invited to volunteer to develop vocational and job readiness skills, with the aim of simultaneously building community capacity to self-manage and self-sustain the toy lending service.

At each site, groups of parent/caregiver volunteers were recruited by the facilitator to help oversee the operations of the toy library. The parent/caregiver volunteers were trained in the SETLS online toy library management system, toy library operations and the foundations of play-based learning. After completion of training, volunteers were provided with a hard-copy Starter Kit to help them further develop the practical skills of running a successful toy library.



Photo (right): Hina, a parent/caregiver volunteer at Dandenong Toy Well, overseeing the lending of toys with her daughter

In Fitzroy, a community partnership was developed with the Brotherhood of St Lawrence to support volunteer placements within the Toy Well program for parents/caregivers already involved in the organisation's career pathway programs.

Evaluation overview

The broad aims of the evaluation were as follows:

1. To understand who uses the toy libraries, why and in what ways? (context)
2. To understand the impact of the Toy Well program on children, parents/caregivers and their families (effectiveness)
3. To understand what has been learnt about establishing and maintaining sustainable volunteer-run toy libraries (learning)

Evaluation and sub evaluation questions were grouped broadly into the following domains: context, effectiveness, and learning (Table 3). This report reports on findings related to all three domains.

Domains	Evaluation and Sub Evaluation Questions
Context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who uses the toy libraries, why and in what ways?
Effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What impact has the program had on children, parents/caregivers and their families? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Whether and in what ways has the program equipped parents/caregivers to support their children's learning at home? ○ Whether and in what ways has the program supported improved wellbeing and social connections for parents/caregivers? ○ Whether and in what ways has the program supported parent/caregiver volunteers to develop confidence, job-readiness and vocational skills? ○ Was there any unexpected impact for children, parents/caregivers and their families?
Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has been learnt about establishing and maintaining sustainable volunteer-run toy libraries?

Table 3: Primary and Sub Evaluation questions

Methodology

A mixed methods study was conducted, encompassing a review administrative records for each site (primarily the SErious Toy Library Software (SETLS) databases), face-to-face interviews and field visit observations.

The face-to-face interviews were undertaken with parents/caregivers, parent/caregiver volunteers and facilitators across the six sites during Term 4, 2019 and Term 1, 2020. A purposeful sampling approach was employed to ensure the parent/caregiver interviewees accurately represented the prominent cultural group at each site (Table 4). The interviews ranged from 20 minutes to one hour in length and were auto taped and transcribed. The interview data was thematically coded and analysed. Quotations from stakeholders are included throughout this report and where needed, pseudonyms have been used to protect privacy. The interview insights were supplemented with field observations by the Toy Well project team.

The analysis and synthesis of the evaluation findings was conducted from March to April 2020. Once data was

analysed, it was assembled against the desired program logic outcomes to draw out findings and recommendations (Appendix 2).

SCA		
Fitzroy	Doveton	Bairnsdale
Facilitator (n=1) Volunteer (n=1) Parent/caregiver (n=1)	Facilitator (n=1) Volunteer (n=1) Parent/caregiver (n=2)	Facilitator (n=1)
CHA		
Dallas Brooks	Dandenong	Geelong North
Facilitator (n=1) Volunteer (n=1) Parent/caregiver (n=1)	Facilitator (n=1) Volunteer (n=1) Parent/caregiver (n=1)	Facilitator Hendy Hub (n=1) Volunteer Hendy Hub (n=1) Parent/caregiver Hendy Hub (n=1) Parent/caregiver Wexford Hub (n=2)
Total sample size (n=19)		

Table 4. Face-to-face interview sample

Limitations

As in any evaluation, there were some limitations with this project:

Influence of existing programs

Other Save the Children Australia and CHA initiatives targeting parenting efficacy and play-based learning (Play2Learn, Supported Playgroups with *smalltalk*) may have influenced participant outcomes.

Small sample size

Due to the relatively small sample size involved in the evaluation, the findings cannot be considered representative of groups of people beyond those who participated in the Toy Well program.

Toy Well program team as evaluators

Both program implementation and data collection activities were conducted by the same team, which may have influenced data collection and reporting of evaluation results.

Findings

Context:

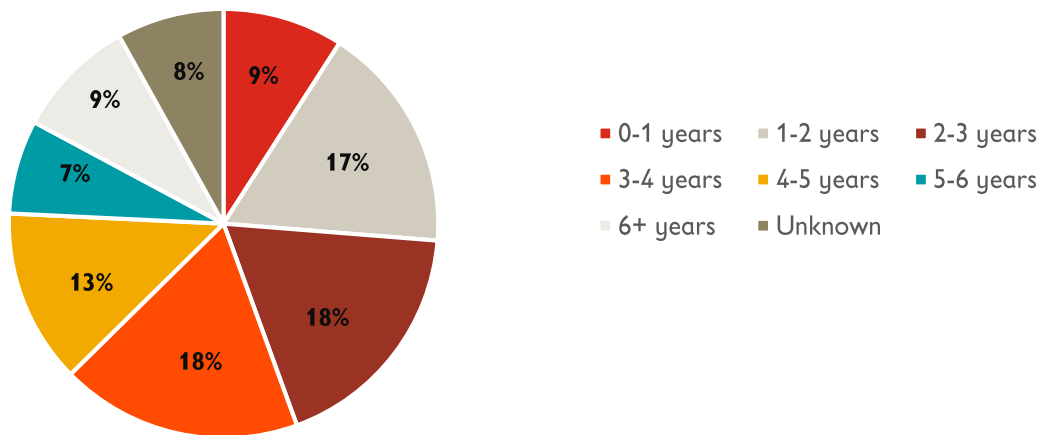
Who uses the toy libraries, why and in what ways?

Membership

In total, 378 families (with 541 children) registered as Toy Well members during the pilot. The age of children reached by the program ranged from 5 months – 8 years old, with children aged 2-3 years old (18%) and 3-4 years old (18%) accounting for the majority of children linked to registered families (see Graph 1).

Across all sites except Bairnsdale and Geelong North's Hendy Hub, the registered families were predominantly from CaLD, migrant and refugee backgrounds. In Bairnsdale and Geelong North's Hendy Hub, families were largely of Anglo-Saxon backgrounds.

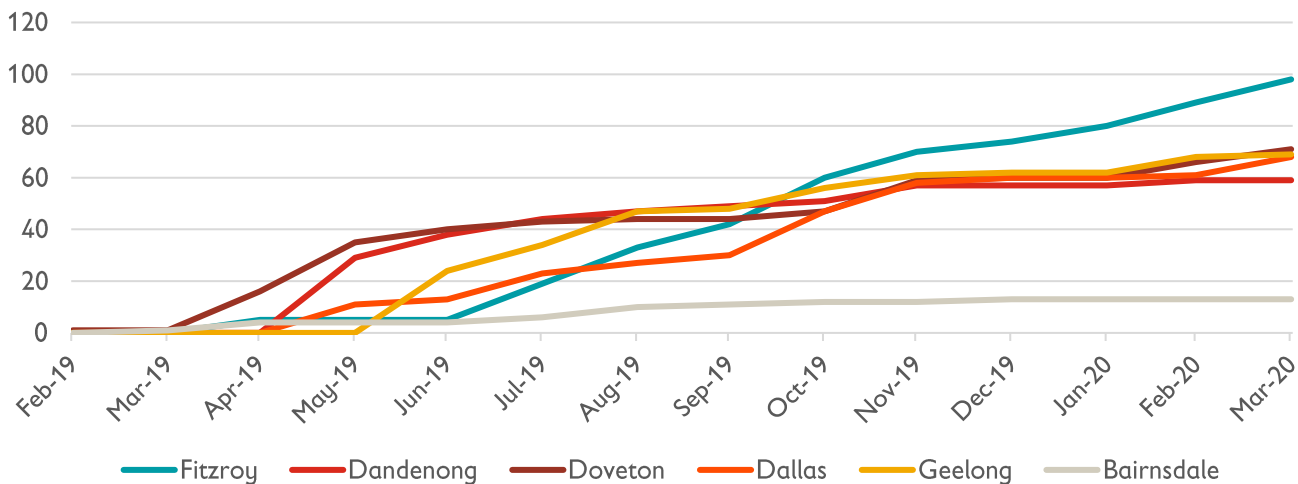
Children reached desegregated by age



Graph 1. Children reached desegregated by age

The number of total members varied considerably across the six sites (Graph 2). In order from largest to smallest membership base, the breakdown was Fitzroy (98 families), Doveton (71 families) Geelong North (69 families), Dallas Brooks (68 members families) and Dandenong (59 families) and Bairnsdale (13 families).

Cumulative number of members per site



Graph 2. Cumulative number of members per site

Parents/caregivers reported multiple reasons for joining the toy libraries. Common themes derived from the interviews included: To save money, for access to high quality educational toys, for access to a wide variety of toys, for access to a renewable source of new toys, and for ease of convenience when the toy library was linked to their existing playgroup.

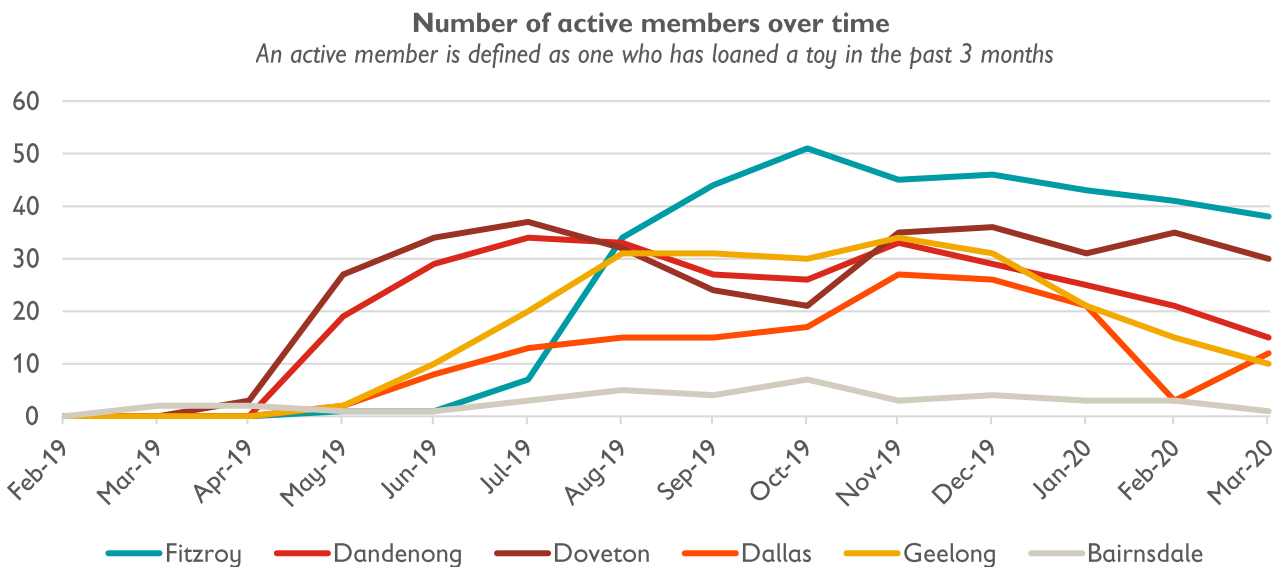
“There are more choices there (Geelong West Toy Library) but you know, I can’t always make it there and it’s not free.” (Parent/caregiver)

Facilitators and parent/caregiver volunteers recalled several reasons families decided not to become members. Mainly, engagement barriers focused on the fear of breaking a toy or losing pieces. Other families, largely of Anglo-Saxon backgrounds, stressed that they already had too many toys at home so didn’t see the need to join a toy library.

Utilisation

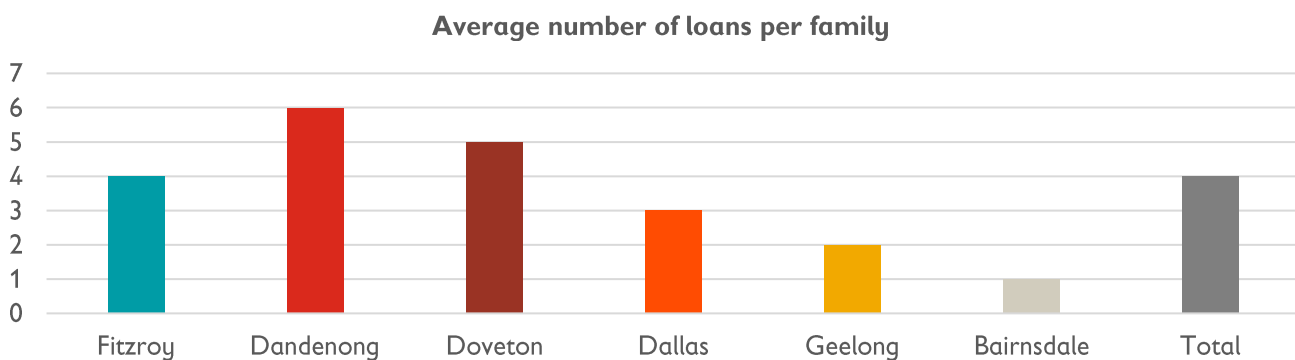
Utilisation of the toy libraries by members differed across the sites, yet trends in member activity was evident (Graph 3). Across nearly all sites, it was found there was a peak of engagement when the program first launched, suggesting excitement and enthusiasm for a new toy lending service. Most sites had a second peak of engagement during November 2019, which may be attributed to the expansion of the Toy Well team. Extra resourcing allowed for the sites to receive increased implementation support, including the delivery of new toys.

Several factors may have impacted the number of active families across the six sites. Firstly, the membership model and the number of families able to join the toy library. For example, Fitzroy was open to members of the public, Doveton was open to three different playgroups, and Dandenong was restricted to families accessing only one playgroup. Secondly, the capacity of the on-site facilitator to drive the program locally with support from parent/caregiver volunteers. For example, the Save the Children Australia East Gippsland team reported that a team restructure, office move, and the 2019-2020 bushfire crisis impacted on Toy Well delivery and uptake from families. Additionally, the Dallas Brooks facilitator reported that difficulty in retaining volunteers resulted in an inconsistent delivery of the program.



Graph 3. Number of active members over time

Over the course of the pilot, 1479 toys were borrowed by families. The average number of loans per family across all sites was four. On average, Dandenong families borrowed six toys, Doveton families borrowed five toys, Fitzroy families borrowed four toys, Dallas Brooks families borrowed three toys, Geelong North families borrowed two toys, and Bairnsdale families borrowed one toy (Graph 4).



Graph 4. Average number of loans per family

Effectiveness

What was the impact of the Toy Well program on children, parents/caregivers and their families?

Parents/caregivers, parent/caregiver volunteers and facilitators reported multiple positive outcomes for families who engaged with the Toy Well program. Diagram 1 provides a summary of reoccurring themes expressed in the face-to-face interviews. These are further explored below and where relevant, mapped against the sub-evaluation questions.

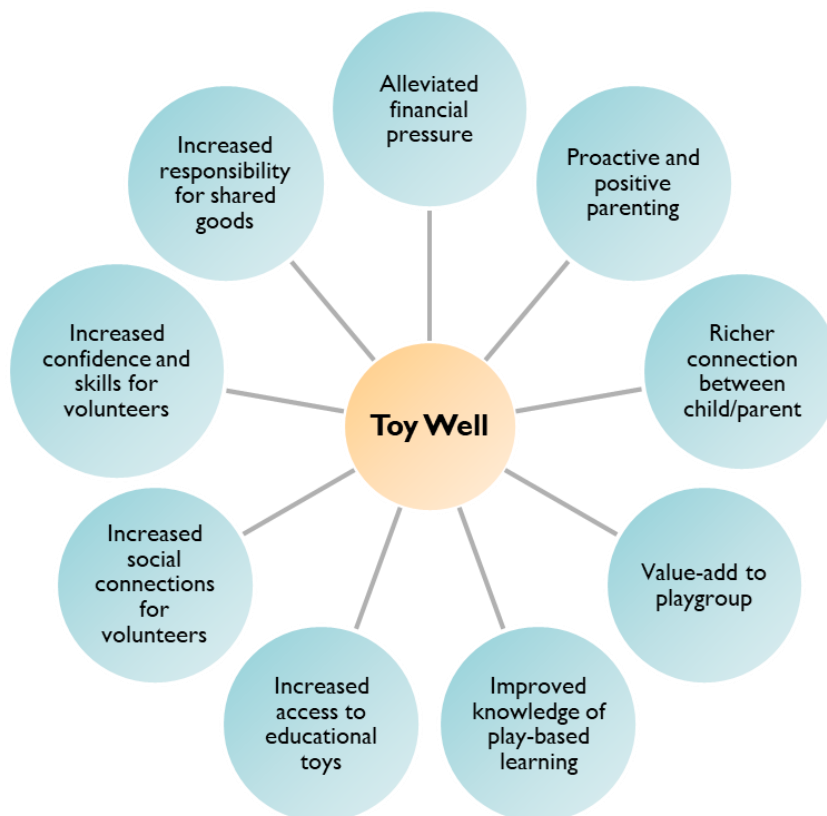


Diagram 1. Impact of Toy Well program on children, parents/caregivers and their families

Parents/caregivers continually noted in the interviews that engagement with the Toy Well program helped alleviate financial demands on their family. For low-income households, the free cost model significantly encouraged membership uptake. Once parents/caregivers were provided with access to a renewable source of quality toys, they reported reduced pressure from their young children to buy new toys. Some parents trialed toys through the toy library to determine if they had genuine play value for their child/ren before potentially purchasing.

“Whenever we go shopping, then the children they just make us very worried to buy this, to buy this. Now this is good to have from here. Now my child know that we have the toy library. From there we can borrow that.”
 (Parent/caregiver)

Whether and in what ways has the program equipped parents/caregivers to support their children’s learning at home?

Beyond the cost savings, evidence from the evaluation suggested that many families valued the educational benefits of participation in the Toy Well program. For some parents/caregivers, use of the toy library felt like a proactive and positive step in supporting their child/ren’s wellbeing, development and preparation for school. Many parents/caregivers spoke about the toys available to borrow as being of a higher quality and educational,

compared to the types of toys already in the family home, which often broke, needed batteries or didn't engage their children.

"These ones are the good ones. They used their motor skills and their brain with those toys. They are not toys that children will get bored with and have to throw it in the rubbish." (Parent/caregiver)

"I think it will help with her studies... Small things even the Lego sets because she has to think of, read the diagram, see how many dots she needs and match it." (Parent/caregiver volunteer)

While the impact was smaller than anticipated, some parents/caregivers reported improved knowledge of play-based learning as a result of accessing the toy library. Parents/caregivers reflected on a shift in their understanding of how play supports their children to learn, how to identify developmentally appropriate toys, and how to get the most play-value out of individual toys.

"We know from toy library what is the toys that is good for our kids to learn...cut fruit into pieces and count this, how many fruits they have." (Parent/caregiver)

"I remember several weeks before there is a teacher (Toy Well Project Coordinator) to teach us how to use that toy correctly. I think it's very useful for us using that library. She explained in detail and then show us how to that toy. Sometimes I think we didn't know very much about that toy." (Parent/caregiver)

Encouragingly, parents/caregivers revealed numerous stories of the toy library acting as a vehicle for increased connections between children, parents/caregivers and the wider family. In some instances, the entire family would make time to sit together and play with the new toy. Multiple mothers reported witnessing an increase in father-child play interactions at home, particularly via toys that required scaffolding or role playing.

"My husband goes to work and now luckily he works close by but still around 6pm he comes. During that time, it's like very isolated and lonely... From the time he comes, she's waiting till he comes to play, 'Daddy, I got a new toy. Come let's play!' So, it's full of laughter, its filled. The house is filled when they're playing with toys." (Parent/caregiver volunteer)

"The toys that have books – the Legos and such things – it was really good. My son was looking at them and when he was stuck, he was saying 'Mum, can you help me?'. It was very good bonding with my son to sit and play." (Parent/caregiver)

Additionally, observations from facilitators indicated that on the day of borrowing a toy, there was an improved engagement between the parent/caregiver-child. This was described as a shared joy in selecting a toy and increased parent/caregiver responsiveness to child.

"The excitement of choosing a toy for the children or for the parent and then taking it home and the experience at home... that builds secure attachment. The child feels that they've been seen, like the parent is interested and it's a fun activity." (Facilitator)

Finally, while some parents/caregivers valued the increased opportunities for their families to engage in quality play, the interviews indicated that others perceived the toy library as a tool to keep their child/ren busy so they could attend to household tasks.

"Sometimes I feel like I haven't any children because they're always busy with this (the toys). Gives me time and space to work my personal work – cooking, washing. Otherwise I have to be busy with them." (Parent/caregiver)

Whether and in what ways has the program supported improved wellbeing and social connections for parents/caregivers?

The evaluation found that the Toy Well program played a valuable role in improving the wellbeing and social connectiveness for parent/caregivers who took on a volunteer role. In comparison, parents/caregivers who simply loaned/returned toys, didn't report an increase in social connection or peer support as a result of the toy library.

Many parent/caregiver volunteers reported stronger social connections inside and outside of playgroup due to their involvement in the toy library. As noted by Aisha, a parent/caregiver who accessed Toy Well for her six-year old son and three-year-old daughter and volunteered her time weekly:

“The Toy Well program has been wonderful because my children like it and it gives me the opportunity to interact with people. Before becoming a volunteer for Toy Well, I didn't have the opportunity to get out and meet people but now I interact with other parents and help them to choose toys. I hope to find work when my daughter is older, and I believe that my experience as a volunteer will be very valuable in helping me do this.”

Through volunteering at the toy library, some of the parents/caregivers saw the work as an important and satisfying way to give back to the broader community after migrating to Australia.

“I was like 'I should do something to give back because they (Save the Children Australia) helped me in so many ways.' We were brand new to this country with nobody, didn't know anybody, so I just wanted to show my gratitude to them.” (Doveton Parent/caregiver volunteer)

The evaluation revealed that while very minimal families were formally referred to wrap around support services available on site, facilitators and parent/caregiver volunteers showed continued interest and followed up with families in a non-threatening way to build trust with families and encourage engagement with the toy lending service.

For a small number of facilitators, the Toy Well program provided a soft entry point to informal conversations with parents/caregivers which helped build stronger relationships with the families.

“And you know that's really big for us – when you have those opportunities to have those chats, build those relations.” (Geelong Facilitator)

Whether and in what ways has the program supported parent/caregiver volunteers to develop confidence, job-readiness and vocational skills?

Results from the interviews indicated that the Toy Well program was effective in providing a meaningful and rewarding volunteer experience for parent/caregiver volunteers.

Many parents/caregiver volunteers of CaLD backgrounds spoke of the multilingual skills they brought to the program and the satisfaction of being able to support parents/caregivers with English as an additional language to engage with the toy library. Other parents/caregivers reflected on opportunity to step back into the workplace after a significant period at home as the primary caregiver.

“I was like only being a housewife and a Mum, so this is a big change, so I wanted to try this. This gave me a satisfaction to be a volunteer, I got new experience, new skills, working with computer and people, directing directions...” (Parent/caregiver Volunteer)

At multiple project sites, there were instances of Toy Well parent/caregiver volunteers obtaining paid work, deciding to pursue future study or actively seeking paid work opportunities with the new confidence and practical skills they had developed through their volunteer position.

Additionally, for a small group of parents/caregivers who had volunteered at Toy Well Doveton, the confidence gained through supporting the toy library led them to initiate a community-led playgroup.

Were there any unexpected impact for children, parents/caregivers and their families?

Toy library as a value add to playgroup

Evidence from the evaluation suggests that the Toy Well program complimented and added value to the playgroups it was purposively linked to.

Many facilitators observed that the toy library brought a sense of excitement to playgroup and noted that children were particularly engaged with the toy library.

“I can confidently say that it has made playgroup a bit more exciting. It has definitely added something.” (Geelong Facilitator)

Other facilitators relayed anecdotal evidence from families that the thrill of borrowing a toy was an incentive for children to attend playgroup. Some facilitators noted that the educational Toy Well resources mirrored the play-based learning concepts promoted to families in playgroup:

“Playgroup and toy library go together. Playgroup helps them learn how they can play with their kids and interact with their kids. And they when they see free toy library, these two programs go together.” (Fitzroy facilitator)

Increased responsibility for shared collective goods:

Prior to Toy Well, most families had not heard of the concept of a toy library. For many, it appears their first experience was positive and may have highlighted the benefits of shared community goods for children and parents/caregivers alike.

When asked what had changed for their children as a result of the pilot, a significant number of parents/caregivers specifically mentioned an improvement in their children caring for and using shared goods. Many spoke of the toy library teaching their young children the concept of sharing:

“Being a 2.5-year-old, I think he’s still more to himself because he doesn’t want to share much – it’s all ‘Mine!’. But every time I tell him this one needs to go back now to playgroup, he pack it in the bag and take it back.” (Parent/caregiver volunteer)

Other parents/caregivers observed their children beginning to show greater care for items that were not their own:

“When we buy new toys from the shop, they play for two to three days and then rubbish. They break it. They don’t want to play anymore. But this one, they look after it, we bring it back. Because someone else uses it.” (Parent/caregiver)

Learning:

What has been learnt about establishing and maintaining sustainable volunteer-run toy libraries?

Across most sites, a small number of parent/caregiver volunteers assisted with overseeing the borrowing, returning, and cleaning of toys.

While there were varying degrees of support required from facilitators (dependent on the developing skillset of the parent/caregiver volunteers), the evaluation revealed that all facilitators were still largely involved in the program delivery each week. On average, facilitators were spending two to three hours per week overseeing the Toy Well program, which was absorbed into their existing workload.

For facilitators who were also delivering large Intensive Supported Playgroups/Supported Playgroups, this became a difficult task:

“It’s very challenging. Sometimes, if the parent volunteers are not in, then we have to handle the toys and return them... We need packing up time, time to finalise the room, clean up. It’s a bit hard.” (Doveton facilitator)

For many facilitators, the recruitment, management and retainment of parent/caregiver volunteers from vulnerable backgrounds themselves, was significantly more time intensive than anticipated. Many had underestimated the level of support parents/caregivers needed to become confident using the toy library processes and systems:

“I didn’t have the time and I think that is why, in terms of our Hub, it didn’t quite take off among the volunteering.” (Dallas Brooks Facilitator)

The evaluation also found that at Bairnsdale and Geelong North (Wexford Hub) sites, facilitators managed the entire loaning/returning processes themselves, as parent/caregivers either lacked confidence or due to family circumstances were unable to step into a volunteer role. In these instances, delivery of the program become inconsistent due to the limited capacity of the facilitators to take this extra workload on.

“At the start it worked well. But in the long term it got challenging just because timewise and capacity.” (Geelong Facilitator)

The implications of the current resourcing model have been linked to identified program challenges below (Table 4).

Challenges	Findings	Identified causes
1. Parent education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smaller impact than anticipated. <p><i>“Sometimes I feel like I haven’t any children because they’re always busy with this (the toys). Gives me time and space to work my personal work – cooking, washing. Otherwise, I have to be busy with them.” (Parent)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Large focus on operational set up of toy libraries. Stronger program monitoring required. Limited resourcing to embed robust parent education component.
2. Linking parents to wrap around services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very limited. Smaller impact than anticipated. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited resourcing onsite to support referrals. Volunteers not trained in targeted family support.
3. Establishing and maintaining volunteer-run toy libraries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hidden cost of local facilitators overseeing program (approx. 2-3 hours per week). Resourcing model limits overall program impact (see challenge #1 and #2). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited capacity of local facilitator to drive volunteer management and support.

Table 4: Program challenges and identified causes

On a positive note, the evaluation has equally shown that successful Toy Well sites shared common operational enablers. These are summarised below (Diagram 2).



Diagram 2. Toy Well operational enablers

Conclusion

In summary, the Toy Well pilot provided a service that addressed a genuine community need. Within a safe and supportive setting, Victorian children and families experiencing vulnerability were provided with a range of high-quality educational toys, free of charge.

The program successfully equipped parents/caregivers to support their children’s learning at home, by expanding their access to developmentally appropriate resources. For many families, this led to richer parent/caregiver-child connections through shared play experiences.

While the Toy Well program increased the parenting capacity of some families through improved knowledge of play-based learning, the level of impact was smaller than anticipated. Other groups of parents/caregivers valued the Toy Well program for the renewable source of toys that kept their children entertained at home.

While the volunteer-run toy library model was beneficial for the meaningful volunteer opportunities it provided parents/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 libraries in addition to their existing workload, with limited capacity to drive volunteer management and support.

Nonetheless, the volunteer component of the Toy Well program played a valuable role in not only assisting parent/caregivers from diverse backgrounds to develop stronger connections with other families, but to gain local work experience and key employable skills.

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

Recommendations

Below are recommendations based on the aforementioned research and evaluation findings, including program learnings and enablers.

Provide adequate resourcing for facilitator to lead program locally

To drive stronger outcomes for families with complex needs, it is essential the on-site facilitator has improved capacity, which includes paid allocated hours, to:

- Drive parent/caregiver volunteer recruitment, coaching, management and retainment
- Deliver an intentional and formalised parent/caregiver education piece around play-based learning (see recommendation below)
- Create referral pathways for children and parents/caregivers engaging with the toy library

Formalise parent/caregiver volunteer component

To attract and retain higher numbers of parent/caregiver volunteers, the volunteer component of the Toy Well program should be formalised. This could include a comprehensive program induction, training modules (child safeguarding, play-based learning, child development), and volunteer certification.

Deliver intentional parent/caregiver education piece

Children targeted by the Toy Well program often have complex family support needs. To enhance the parenting skills of their parents/caregivers and trust these skills will transfer to the home environment, it is recommended the Toy Well program provides a more formalised parent/caregiver education component.

Make Toy Well sites accessible for playgroup and non-playgroup families

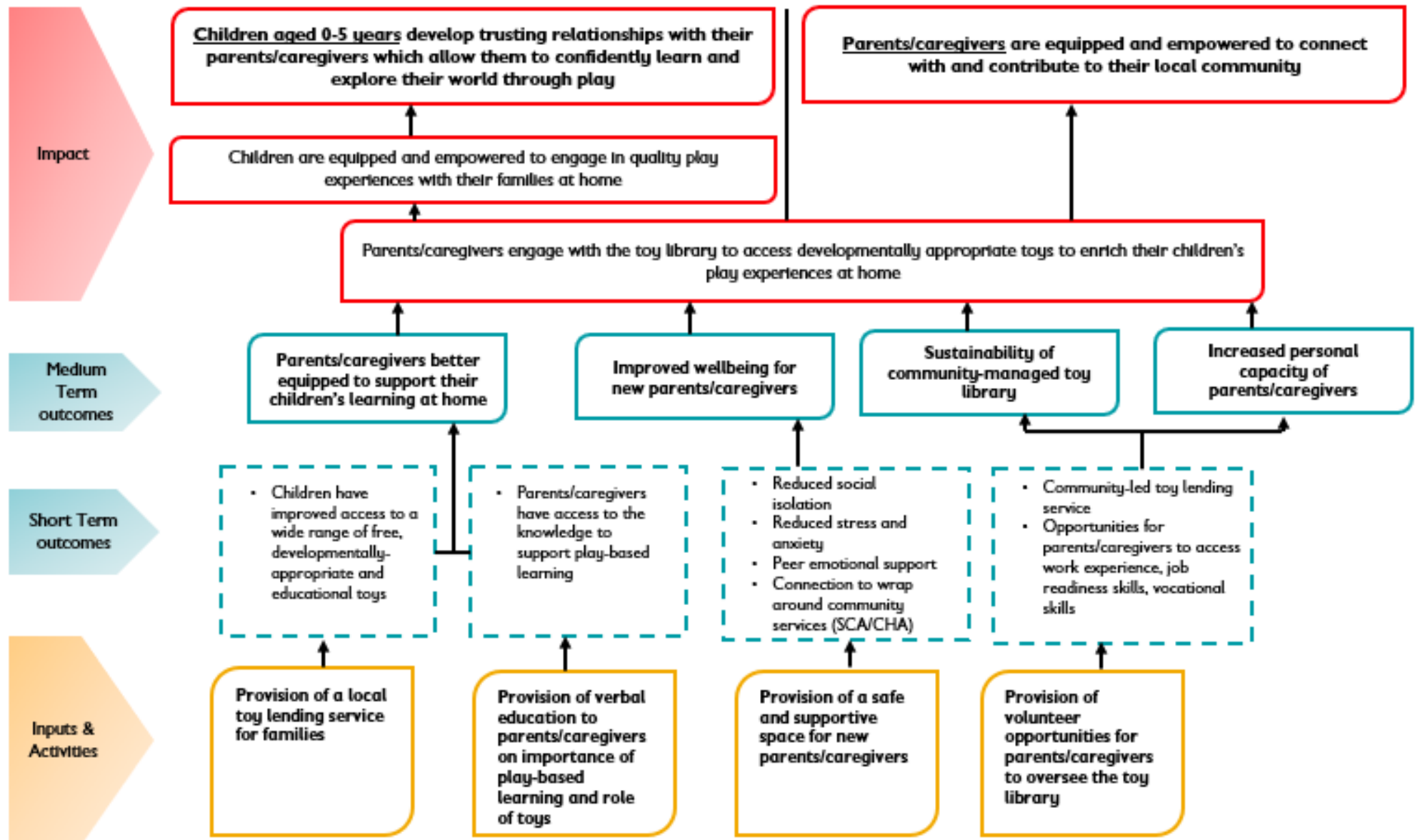
To improve the wellbeing and social connections of a larger number of parents/caregivers, it is recommended to open the toy library purposely during targeted playgroups but also at another time to the general public. This may encourage the toy library to become a soft entry point for families to engage with wrap around services that CHA, Save the Children Australia and other community organisations offer onsite.

Explore potential of Toy Well program in universal settings

There is potential for the existing Toy Well model to be moved into a more universal setting. Families accessing mainstream integrated family support programs (Maternal Health Nurse clinics, community playgroups) could access the potential benefits of having a welcoming, volunteer-run toy library onsite.

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/caregivers, especially the most vulnerable and disadvantaged who continue to be at the centre of everything we do.

Appendix 1: Toy Well Program Logic



Appendix 2: Evaluation findings mapped against Toy Well program logic

Program Logic				Evaluation Findings					
Activity input	Short-term outcome	Med-term outcome	Impact	Results	Rational	Causes			
<i>Local toy lending service</i>	Improved access to free, educational toys (children)	Parents better equipped to support their children's learning at home	<p style="text-align: center;">→</p> <p>Children develop trusting relationships with parents allowing them to confidently learn and explore their world through play</p>	<p>Effective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Free model drove membership uptake. - Renewable access to wide range of quality toys valued. - Parents feel proactive in supporting child's development. - Toys as sticking point for increased family connection in home (including father). 	<p>Large focus on operational set up of toy libraries.</p>			
<i>Verbal education to parents on importance of play-based learning and role of toys</i>	Access to knowledge to support play-based learning (parents)						<p>Increased parent engagement with Toy Well sites</p>	<p>Somewhat effective</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some parents reported new understandings around play-based learning. - Other parents used toy library to keep children busy.
<i>A safe and supportive space for parents</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Connection to wrap around support services (SCA/CHA) - Reduced social isolation - Peer emotional support (parents) 	Improved wellbeing for parents							

Volunteer opportunities to oversee toy library	Access work experience, job readiness skills, vocational skills (parents)	Increased personal capacity of parents	Increased parent engagement with Toy Well sites	Parents equipped and empowered to connect with and contribute to their local community	Effective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Volunteers reported increased confidence/belief in self. - Supported pathways to further study and paid employment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited capacity of local facilitator to drive volunteer management and support. - More formalised volunteer component needed (induction, training modules, child safeguarding)
	Community-run toy lending service	Sustainability of community-managed toy library			Somewhat effective	Hidden cost of local facilitators overseeing program (approx. 2-3 hours per week).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited capacity of local facilitator to drive volunteer management and support. - Focus on supporting parent volunteers (vs. community volunteers) aligned with Australian Programs Practice Approaches.
					Unintended Evaluation Findings		
					Very effective (Increased responsibility for shared collective goods)	Facilitators/parents/parent volunteers reported improvement in children caring for and using shared goods.	Positive toy library experience reinforced benefits of community goods.
					Effective (Toy library as value add to playgroup)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increased child engagement in playgroup. - Facilitators see clear link between playgroup learnings and Toy Well resources. 	Program aligned to The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) principles.

