

Grant program report

3D (disability and developmental delay) Additional toy library sessions funding

July 2026



**Toy Libraries
Australia**



Funding acknowledgement

This program was funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services.



“Prior to the implementation of this program no one identified as having a hidden disability or wore a lanyard. We now have two members who consistently wear a lanyard each week. This has led to open discussion of how we can support them better. For one member, it has meant extended borrowing times and some extra assistance getting items to the car. Knowing she can have the toys longer has meant a reduction in anxiety and an increased willingness to borrow as she doesn't know when she will be well enough to return them.”

Rosebud Toy Library

Executive summary

The 3D (Disability and Developmental Delay) Additional Sessions Grant Program was established to improve access to toy libraries for children experiencing disability or developmental delay and their families. While the funding enabled participating toy libraries to increase paid staff hours to deliver additional or adapted sessions, the evaluation shows its greatest impact was building the capacity of toy libraries to become more inclusive and responsive organisations.

Initially the 3D Program established separate low-sensory borrowing sessions, however, uptake of this model was low despite research identifying this need. Many toy libraries adapted the funding to local needs through flexible borrowing, supported play, outreach and more individualized assistance. Toy libraries that made these adjustments achieved stronger participation than those relying on fixed additional sessions. They also strengthened staff and volunteer capability, improved environmental accessibility, expanded inclusive resources and developed partnerships with allied health, early childhood and disability services.

This is an important finding for toy libraries – families borrowing for children with disability or developmental delay want mainstream toy library services to be inclusive and accessible, they do not want a separate service.

These improvements translated into clear benefits for families. Survey responses from families who have benefited from the program showed that almost all experienced financial and environmental benefits through borrowing rather than purchasing toys. More than four in five reported greater enjoyment playing with their child, increased confidence supporting their child's development and stronger connections with their local community. Families borrowing for children with disability, developmental delay or while navigating diagnosis consistently reported the greatest benefits, highlighting the value of the inclusive approaches supported through the program.

The greatest challenge now is sustaining these gains. Continued investment would help retain the skilled staff, inclusive practices and community partnerships that have enabled toy libraries to deliver lasting outcomes for children and families.

“Thank you for being inclusive and doing a little bit to help the world be a kinder place towards children with disabilities... it is so accessible and important.”

Parent of a child with a duplication), toy library member

Background and Program Delivery

The 3D grant program was funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services through the Children and Parenting Supports program.

In 2024 Toy Libraries Australia completed research into the barriers and facilitators affecting access to toy libraries for children with disability and their families as part of the ILC funded Disability Access Inclusion Support (DAIS) program. The research led by Western Sydney University found that families with children with disability wanted 'longer opening hours' and needed 'quite times and sessions for children with sensory needs'. Read the full report [HERE](#).

- Funding announcement: Minister Rishworth [6 March 2025](#)
- Total toy library grant funding available: \$330,000. 30 x \$11,000 grants
- Grant applications opened: 21 March 2025; and closed 21 April.
- Projects delivered 1 July 2025- 30 June 2026. Noting that 3 toy libraries were accepted and commenced in August 2025.
- Applications received: 36

Funding was administered through SmartyGrants and supported by Toy Libraries Australia staff.

"The toy library is now a go-to place for peer support and education. We had many families start to build community at our stay and plays. The information and education provided by our guest allied health professionals was extraordinary and really will have long-term impacts on both our service and the families who attended those sessions."

Yarra Ranges Community Toy Libraries

Participating toy libraries

Name	State	Governance
Armadale Toy Library	WA	Community centre
Bendigo Community Toy Library	Vic	Independent toy library
Brisbane South Toy Library	Qld	Independent toy library
Bunbury Regional Toy Library	WA	Independent toy library
Bundaberg Disability Resource Centre and Toy Library	Qld	YMCA
Busselton Toy Library	WA	Independent toy library
Capricorn Coast Toy Library	Qld	Independent toy library
Carlisle / Victoria Park Toy Library	WA	Independent toy library
City of Burnside Toy Library	SA	Council
Collingwood Toy Library - Abbotsford	Vic	Independent toy library
Collingwood Toy Library - Fitzroy	Vic	Independent toy library
Darebin Toy Library	Vic	Independent toy library
Gosnells Toy Library	WA	Independent toy library
Hastings Toy Library	Vic	Independent toy library
Hobsons Bay Toy Library	Vic	Independent toy library
Merri-bek Toy Library	Vic	Independent toy library
Moonee Valley Toy Library - Avondale	Vic	Independent toy library
Moonee Valley Toy Library - Essendon	Vic	Independent toy library
Murray Bridge Toy Library	SA	Council
Newcastle Toy Library	NSW	Independent toy library
Ocean Grove Toy Library	Vic	Independent toy library
Reach Out Glenn Innes	NSW	Independent toy library
Richmond Toy Library	Vic	Independent toy library
Rosebud Toy Library	Vic	Independent toy library
SECC Toy Library	NSW	Community centre
Smile-A-Mile Fun Bus & Toy Library .	NT	Independent toy library
Stonnington Toy Library - Malvern	Vic	Independent toy library
Tea Tree Gully Toy Library	SA	Independent toy library
Yarra Ranges Community Toy Libraries - Montrose	Vic	Independent toy library
Yarra Ranges Community Toy Libraries - Mount Evelyn	Vic	Independent toy library

“As a result of this of the training, we reviewed and updated our organisational policies, including those relating to the Toy Library, to align with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations. Three staff members completed training, increasing their confidence in maintaining child-safe practices. Improvements to toy cleaning, checking, and supervision have strengthened safety.”

Armadale Toy Library

Evaluation Approach

Evaluation combined

- monthly reporting
- midway reporting
- online and in-person drop-in sessions
- final acquittal
- activity and impact reporting aligned to the toy library quality standards
- survey of members who benefited from the additional sessions
- friends of the toy library (allied health, disability and early years professionals) survey.

This combination of evaluation methods helped toy libraries keep on top of reporting and enabled Toy Libraries Australia staff to identify support needs, celebrate progress and assist toy libraries to reorient their projects when attendance or delivery differed from expectations.

A key evaluation learning was the need to look beyond attendance at a single session. Some toy libraries initially interpreted low attendance as limited impact. The program helped reframe success to include reduced barriers, improved family experience, improved community connections, workforce capability and changes embedded across all opening times.

Program Reach

- Additional sessions: 1247 sessions
- Total number of hours the additional sessions: 2532 hours
- Total number of member family visits during additional sessions: 4656 families
- Stay, Play and Borrow sessions: 216 sessions
- Click and collect sessions: 591 sessions
- Information sessions: 25 sessions
- Member training sessions: 15 sessions
- Other sessions: 49 sessions

Some examples of 'other' sessions includes pop up toy library sessions at community centres, a Auslan signed puppet show at the toy library, attending a disability providers family day event.

"Participation in one of the TLA online gatherings for all the 3D coordinators from around Australia was really informative and demonstrated the passion and commitment to the program of all involved. Very inspiring."

Merri-bek Toy Library

Family Outcomes

Alongside monthly reporting and final acquittals, Toy Libraries Australia surveyed families who attended additional sessions or benefited from changes implemented through the grant.

A total of 127 families completed the survey, including 48 families (38%) borrowing for a child with disability, developmental delay or while navigating diagnosis.

The survey demonstrates that organisational improvements made by toy libraries translated into measurable benefits for families.

Family outcome	Agree/Strongly agree
N= 127	
Saved money	96%
Reduced waste through fewer toy purchases	92%
Experienced more joy playing with their child/ren	88%
Felt more confident supporting their child's development	84%
Felt more connected to their local community	80%
Spent more time playing together	78%
Felt less stressed as a parent/carer	75%
Experienced less clutter at home	75%
Made new friends through the toy library	41%

Families borrowing for children with disability reported consistently stronger outcomes across every measure. Although the sample size means these differences should be interpreted cautiously, the pattern provides encouraging evidence that the inclusive approaches developed through this program are particularly valuable for the families the funding was designed to support.

"Members can trial different items at home in different scenarios before purchasing potentially expensive aids that may not work."

Bendigo Community Toy Library



What Changed?

Program Impact

1. Building organisational capability

Additional staffing gave toy libraries time to undertake work that is difficult to complete during busy borrowing sessions. The grant strengthened both individual capability and toy library organisational systems, including child safety, governance, volunteer support and reflective practice.

Activities included:

- employing paid staff, including first-time paid roles
- staff, committee and volunteer training in disability awareness, hidden disability, child safety and inclusive practice.
- on-the-job learning, mentoring and role development
- reviewing policies, procedures, membership structures and borrowing procedures.
- strengthening administration, compliance and workforce processes



"The toy library is more secure in its community connections, more on top of administrative overheads and compliance issues and has better processes as a result of the time we were able to dedicate to administration as a result of this grant."

Yarra Ranges Community Toy Libraries

2. Increasing equitable access

Toy libraries learned that equitable access required more than extending hours. Families benefited when the service model reduced sensory, procedural, membership and communication barriers and allowed greater flexibility.

Activities included:

- low-sensory and quieter borrowing sessions
- drop-in, bookable and individual appointments
- click and collect, outreach and alternative collection arrangements
- supported borrowing and concierge-style assistance
- clearer signage, accessible information and improved wayfinding
- changes to membership or borrowing processes

The impact of these service changes we believe shone through as family self reported outcomes. Feedback also demonstrated that quieter sessions reduced barriers not only for children with disability, but also for parents and carers experiencing sensory overload, anxiety or other challenges, highlighting the broader benefits of universal inclusive design.



“We have created a welcoming, calm and quiet environment for our low sensory borrowing session. Families, as well as volunteers who support these sessions, have provided feedback on how much more relaxing it is to visit these borrowing sessions, that it reduces stress and anxiety for some parents, and parents have commented that they have additional needs that the low sensory environment supports which has meant they can come to the toy library with their children for the first time and enjoy the experience together.”

Newcastle Toy Library



3. Embedding inclusion into everyday practice

The strongest evidence of lasting change was the movement from stand-alone disability initiatives to inclusion as a routine consideration in decisions about people, environments, resources, communication and service planning.

Improvements made for grant-funded sessions were often extended to and retained for normal opening hours.

Activities included:

- reducing clutter, adjusting lighting and creating calmer spaces
- introducing communication aids, visual supports and accessible stories
- reorganising shelves and creating sensory or developmental categories
- purchasing sensory, adaptive and developmentally focused resources
- using family feedback and professional advice to guide future purchasing and planning.



"One of the most significant outcomes of the project was a shift in our mindset: what we can do and/or do differently; and who we can work with to better support our members. MVTL increasingly considers accessibility and inclusion in everyday decision-making, partnerships, toy selection, environmental improvements and future planning."

Moonee Valley Toy Library



4. Strengthening community connections

Partnership development was one of the most valuable outcomes. Toy libraries moved from promoting sessions in isolation to becoming active participants in local early childhood, disability and allied health networks. These relationships increased awareness, recommendation pathways, specialist input and confidence among staff and families.

Activities included:

- contacting allied health professionals, maternal and child health nurses, schools, kindergartens, councils and disability organisations
- hosting occupational therapists', speech pathologists and other professionals at sessions
- developing joint information resources and toy guides
- parent education sessions and stay and play sessions.

The survey reinforced the importance of these partnerships. Eighty per cent of respondents to our member survey reported feeling more connected to their local community through their toy library, while families frequently described toy libraries as welcoming places where they felt accepted, supported and able to connect with other families. Although making new friends was not the primary outcome of participation, 41% of respondents reported that they had developed new friendships through their toy library.



“This has definitely been the biggest positive outcome of this project. We have created relationships that will continue to flourish. In the coming months, we will be working together with student OT's to create educational flyers around using toys to target specific skills, for use by our families. We will continue to build on these relationships.”

Bunbury Regional Toy Library



5. Improving resources and family confidence

New resources expanded the range of play options available to children with diverse developmental and sensory needs.

The survey findings demonstrate that these investments extended well beyond access to toys. Eighty-four per cent of respondents reported feeling more confident supporting their child's development, while 88% reported experiencing greater joy when playing with their child. Families described borrowing specialist, sensory and developmental toys before deciding whether to purchase them, allowing them to trial resources that may otherwise have been financially out of reach.

Activities included:

- purchasing sensory, adaptive, communication and fine-motor resources
- adding fidgets, earmuffs, movement equipment and visual supports
- creating developmental guides and signage
- integrating inclusive resources into the general collection
- using allied health advice to inform collection development.



"The new resources have been received well from families and are rarely in the Toy Library as they are out on loan."

Darebin Toy Library

6. Impact for families and children

The family survey provides strong evidence that the organisational improvements implemented by toy libraries translated into meaningful changes in everyday family life.

Beyond the headline outcomes of increased confidence, connection and enjoyment of play, families described changing how they played at home. Rather than purchasing more toys, many families described borrowing a wider range of resources, rotating toys more regularly and selecting toys that better matched their child's interests and developmental needs.

"We purchase less toys for our children and we spend more time as a family trying new toys and games." Parent, toy library member.

"We are focusing on toys with intention of how they are both for play but also for development." Parent, toy library member.

Families also consistently highlighted the value of flexible access, knowledgeable volunteers and specialist resources. The most commonly valued aspects of toy library membership were the variety of toys available (52%), reduced waste and clutter (21%), welcoming community (14%) and helpful staff and volunteers (13%).

One of the strongest findings was that inclusive design benefited a much broader group of families than originally anticipated. Quiet borrowing sessions, flexible opening hours and additional staff support were praised not only by families of children with disability, but also by families experiencing sensory overload, anxiety and other barriers to participation.

"The low sensory sessions now offered have made going to the toy library much less stressful and more accessible to us, it means my children and I aren't being overstimulated when we go and gives us the time and space for any meltdowns, I really hope this can continue." Parent of a child with disability (Autism, ADHD), toy library member.

These findings reinforce that relatively modest organisational changes can produce meaningful improvements in participation, confidence, family wellbeing and community connection.



"I can now take both my kids to choose toys. In the past, this sort of thing was too overwhelming for my son and I had to leave him with a carer to take my youngest to the toy library. With the private sessions, we can control the noise etc. because the other kids aren't there."

Reach Out Glenn Innes Toy Library

When asked “since attending the toy library, have you done anything differently at home with your child/children?”

Families reported that they are:

Rotating toys more often and providing greater variety	35%
Spending more time engaged in play together	22%
Making more informed purchasing decisions	17%
Using toys more intentionally to support development	9%



“This is such a valuable service to my family and wider community. Providing both my children and myself more opportunities to PLAY has helped strengthen us as a family and also support our children’s development.”

Parent of a child with disability (Autism/ADHD), toy library member

Implementation, Learning and Sustainability

The program demonstrated that toy library inclusive service design must remain flexible. Some bookable or fixed-time sessions attracted limited attendance despite substantial promotion. Toy Libraries achieved better results when they adapted to local circumstances through open drop-in sessions, outreach, Stay and Play, longer opening hours or individual assistance. Low attendance did not necessarily indicate low value: additional staff time was also used for relationship-building, catalogue improvement, resource preparation, communication and organisational development.

One of the clearest lessons from both toy library reporting and member survey responses was that inclusive design benefits a broader range of families than those originally targeted. Strategies such as quieter sessions, supported borrowing, flexible opening hours and improved accessibility reduced barriers for families of children with disability while also supporting families experiencing sensory sensitivities, anxiety and competing family commitments. This demonstrates the value of universal approaches that improve participation across the whole community while maintaining a strong focus on children with disability.

The principal ongoing challenge is sustainability. Paid staff improved consistency and reduced pressure during sessions, but also introduced payroll, supervision and administration requirements. Toy libraries expressed concern about maintaining staffing and managing expectations after funding ends. We continue to seek and advocate for funding to toy libraries that has longer implementation periods, support for employment administration, early assistance with project design and flexibility to reallocate effort when the original plans prove not effective.



“This was the first time that our coordinators have completed training to improve their knowledge/awareness of disability, with positive feedback.”

Hobsons Bay Toy Library



Conclusion

The 3D Additional Sessions Grant Program delivered far more than additional opening hours. Additional staffing provided the capacity for toy libraries to strengthen governance, workforce capability, partnerships, inclusive practice and service quality while creating more welcoming and accessible environments for families.

The program reach included 1,131 additional sessions, but its greatest legacy is the organisational change that occurred within participating toy libraries. Inclusion shifted from being viewed as a discrete activity to becoming embedded in everyday decision-making, influencing environments, communication, collections, partnerships and service delivery.

The family survey confirms that these organisational improvements translated into measurable benefits for families. Respondents reported increased confidence supporting their children's development, greater joy in play, stronger community connection, reduced stress and significant financial and environmental benefits. Families borrowing for children with disability consistently reported the strongest outcomes, reinforcing the value of investing in inclusive community services.

The evaluation also highlights an important lesson for future investment. Success was achieved not by delivering more sessions alone, but by giving toy libraries the flexibility, staffing and capability to redesign services around the needs of their communities. Continued investment in these approaches has the potential to deliver lasting improvements in participation, belonging and developmental outcomes for children with disability and their families.



"Inclusion has become embedded in the way MVTL operates rather than being limited to a specific project or session."

Moonee Valley Toy Library