

Getting Ready for Play!

Toy Collections in Public Libraries

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Children play with toys from the toy collection at Cuyahoga County Public Library in Ohio.

Looking for a lively way to enhance early literacy services at your library? Hoping to increase circulation, community engagement, and fun in the children's section? Consider adding circulating toys, games, puppets, and puzzles to your children's collection.

The second edition of *Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR)* intentionally includes play as one of the five fundamental practices for building early literacy skills for all children. The ALSC white paper on the importance of play explains how play “encourages healthy brain development while fostering exploration skills, language skills, social skills, physical skills, and creativity.”¹

In his clinical report for the American Academy of Pediatrics, Kenneth Ginsburg notes that play provides crucial parent-child interaction, and that the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights has even recognized play as a right of every child.² Offering toys for public circulation is a fun, inviting, and manageable way to create play opportunities at your library.

Overcoming Barriers to Play

Access to toys and unstructured playtime is not a given for all children. Many contemporary children face significant barriers to the play they need for healthy early childhood development. Recent parenting trends have led many affluent parents to fill



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their children's schedules with structured extracurricular activities, eliminating sufficient time for free play.³

Similarly, recent educational trends and legislative standards have led schools—even including preschools—to reduce time for free play in daily schedules, replacing recess and other unstructured time with controlled educational activities.⁴

Especially in urban areas, some parents must limit their children's free and group playtime because of neighborhood safety concerns.⁵ Furthermore, poverty leaves many children without access to toys and games, or even opportunities to explore and interact with the world in unstructured play. Additionally, many studies have demonstrated the importance of adult-child interaction for all children's language acquisition and school readiness.

A forthcoming study by Susan B. Neuman suggests that parent-child engagement in playtime may be even more beneficial for children, especially those in lower socioeconomic groups, than the quantity of words spoken.⁶ Playtime is significant learning time, and too many barriers stand in the way for disadvantaged children.

Children with disabilities also face many obstacles to enriching playtime, from inaccessible toys, to time-consuming medical and therapy appointments, to persistent stigmas and social exclusion. Exploratory, imaginative, and investigative play are just as important for children with and without disabilities; in fact, some argue that unstructured play is more important for children with disabilities.⁷ Furthermore, accessible and adapted toys specifically for children with disabilities are often cost-prohibitive, particularly for families with high medical expenses.

The barriers that keep so many children from accessing play in early childhood point to the necessity of public libraries to provide toys and play experiences without direct cost to the public. Circulating toy collections provides valuable community resources by allowing families, caregivers, and educators to borrow toys for free for specific lending periods.

This free access to toys provides many benefits for all children, especially the opportunity to vary a child's toys to keep pace with ever-changing interests and abilities. Particularly for children with disabilities, library toy collections provide families with opportunities to test large and costly toys before purchasing them, to measure a child's skill mastery with specifically designed toys, and to meet the needs of each child's changing developmental goals.⁸

Not a New Concept

Donna Giannantonio of the USA Toy Library Association board of directors surmises that toy lending libraries began in the United States during the Great Depression. Today, various public and private organizations allow paying members to borrow toys and sometimes offer subsidies for qualifying families. There

is an even broader public need for equitable access to toys and play. Public libraries in particular “have a vital role to play in this restoration of play as the prime activity of childhood.”⁹ Even on a small scale, library toy collections offer crucial and significant early literacy support to the public.

A Snapshot of Public Library Toy Collections

Libraries across the country are already providing toy collections to their communities. In our informal survey of public libraries that currently circulate toys, we found a wide variety of sizes, costs, and collection scopes (see table 1). Most of the twenty-six libraries that responded circulate more than one hundred toys, although a few circulate fewer than twenty toys. While most of these collections began in the last two decades, one was created in 1939. In general, toy collections are designed for children ages birth to five, although some focus on preschool and elementary students as their target audience.

For roughly half of these twenty-six libraries, their initial costs exceeded \$1,000. The other half spent less than \$1,000 initially, with most of that half spending under \$500. Yearly maintenance costs depend on the size of the collection. Most of these libraries spend less than \$500 per year to maintain their toy collections, and only two spend more than \$1,000 annually. Funding sources for these toy collections include regular library materials budgets, grants, local or private donations, Friends of the Library groups, or library foundations.

Cataloging and circulation procedures for these collections vary widely. Most have established procedures for examining and cleaning returned toys as part of regular collection maintenance. Among library systems with multiple branches, some share collections across branches and through interlibrary loan, while others house toys at only one branch.

While five of these libraries keep all of their toy materials in staff-only areas and provide printed catalogs for public browsing, most of these toy collections are stored on the public floor, usually in mesh or clear hanging bags or clear bins.

Just under half of these twenty-six libraries do not have dedicated staff to manage their toy collections. Staffing for the toy collections at the remaining libraries ranges from volunteers, to general duties for regular staff members, to designated part-time staff members. Most of our respondents do not actively market their collections or only marketed them initially and have relied on collection visibility since. Marketing for the remaining toy collections includes library websites and Facebook pages, printed brochures, newspaper coverage, school field trips, and intentional programming connections.

Material types also vary, ranging from basic and common toys to more unique and advanced materials for play. These libraries circulate baby toys; blocks, including LEGOs; wooden toys; puzzles; puppets; dolls, including Star Wars toys and American Girl dolls; musical instruments; board games; ride-on toys;

Table 1. Library Toy Collection Survey Results

Libraries with a service population larger than 50,000

Toys	Collection started	Initial cost	Yearly cost
100+	2010–2015	\$1,000+	Unknown
100+	1990–2010	\$1,000+	\$1,000+
100+	1970–1990	\$1,000+	\$500–\$1,000
100+	Unknown	\$1,000+	\$100–\$500
100+	1970–1990	\$500–\$1,000	\$1,000+

Libraries with a service population between 20,000 and 50,000

Toys	Collection started	Initial cost	Yearly cost
50–100	2010–2015	\$1,000+	\$100–\$500
<20	2010–2015	\$100–\$500	-\$100
50–100	1990–2010	\$1,000+	\$500–\$1,000
20–50	2010–2015	\$100–\$500	-\$100
100+	1970–1990	\$100–\$500	\$100–\$500
50–100	2010–2015	\$100–\$500	-\$100
100+	1970–1990	\$1,000+	\$100–\$500
50–100	Unknown	Unknown	\$100–\$500
100+	1990–2010	\$500–\$1,000	\$100–\$500
100+	1990–2010	\$100–\$500	\$100–\$500
<20	Unknown	-\$100	-\$100

Libraries with a service population between 10,000 and 20,000

Toys	Collection started	Initial cost	Yearly cost
<20	2010–2015	\$500–\$1,000	-\$100
100+	1990–2010	\$1,000+	\$500–\$1,000
100+	1990–2010	\$1,000+	\$100–\$500
20–50	1990–2010	\$1,000+	\$100–\$500

Libraries with service populations under 10,000

Toys	Collection started	Initial cost	Yearly cost
50–100	1939	\$1,000+	-\$100
20–50	1990–2010	\$100–\$500	\$100–\$500
100+	1970–1990	\$1,000+	-\$100
Unknown	1990–2010	-\$100	\$100–\$500
100+	2010–2015	\$1,000+	-\$100
50–100	Unknown	-\$100	-\$100

pretend play toys; electronic toys, including LeapPad tablets; themed kits with books, manipulatives, and sometimes activity guides; and maker kits.

Libraries purchase their toy realia from a variety of vendors, including local stores, online (Amazon or eBay), Oriental Trading, American Girl, Constructive Playthings, Discount School Supply, Environments, Kaplan, Lakeshore Learning, Learning Resources, Learning Shop, Melissa and Doug, Land of Nod, Nova Natural, Acorn Toy Shop, direct sales at conferences, or from companies like Penworthy and Folkmanis.

We were also interested to learn about the particular needs and desired changes of staff working with these toy collections. Our respondents most commonly mentioned more space, more funding, and more marketing as their greatest current needs. Other desires include

- help with cleaning and maintaining toys;
- better procedures for dealing with damage from in-house use;
- more effective cataloging for toys with multiple pieces;
- less demands on staff time;
- better integration of toys with branch play areas and early literacy programming;
- renovations to make the space more inviting;
- more buy-in and support from frontline staff;
- more thorough staff training on the importance of play for early literacy; and
- greater accessibility to reach more children.

The Learning and Sharing Collection

One example of a large and well established toy collection is the Learning and Sharing Collection (LSC) at Harford County Public Library (HCPL) in Maryland. Originally called the Learning and Sharing Center, this pioneering toy collection was created with grant support in 1975 and grew over the decades under the guidance of several dedicated staff members.

Today, this early literacy realia collection contains more than one thousand items, including toys, games, puppets, storytime pals (literacy kits with books and coordinating manipulatives and audio CDs), puzzles, and themed skill-building kits for children ages birth to five. In 2012, the LSC was expanded beyond its long-standing home at the Bel Air Branch to shared circulation at four more of HCPL's eleven branches. At the Bel Air Branch, the LSC also contains sets of picture books for use in the Sharing the Gift program, a volunteer storytime outreach initiative for local preschools and day care centers that was also founded in 1975.

Cataloging for the LSC is organized into eight call numbers for finger puppets, games, hand puppets, music toys, puzzles, storytime pals, toys, and wooden toys.

Certain items are also cataloged with call number subcategories, such as animals, food and cooking, infants, letters and words, motor skills, numbers, people, science, senses, sequencing, storytelling, time, and transportation.

HCPL's Materials Management department allocates funding each fiscal year to cover new and replacement toys and books.

To mark the fortieth anniversary this year, the LSC is relaunching and expanding to all eleven HCPL branches. At early stages, the relaunch plans include

- new branding and marketing, including a shorter and catchier name;
- a complete evaluation and update of the entire collection;
- the creation of new materials selection and retention procedures;
- the addition of new materials focused on skill development and accessibility for children with special needs;
- moving all materials previously stored in staff-only areas onto the public floor;
- intentional integration into the forthcoming early literacy center at the Bel Air Branch;
- more efficient shelving and clearer signage;
- a more robust Web presence, including curated record sets with photos linking to the online catalog, skill-specific information and tutorial videos, and inclusion in HCPL's digital readers' advisory service (Beanstack, offered in partnership with Zoobean); and
- new family workshop programming for early literacy play and skill development using library toys.

Considerations and Best Practices

Even with the wide variety among toy collections, there are fundamental standards to guide libraries in starting and maintaining their collections. First and foremost, we must “understand children’s stages of development and what types of play are good for certain ages or stages.”¹⁰

ALSC identifies three basic types of play:

1. object or exploratory play;
2. pretend, imaginative, or dramatic play; and
3. social, physical, or investigative play.¹¹

Library toy collections should include materials to support each of these types of play, which are also appropriate for their chosen target ages or developmental stages. It is also important to understand the particular needs of your library’s local community when selecting toys, coordinating collection logistics, and designing related marketing and programming.

Also consider how your circulating toys will fit into your system’s strategic plan. It’s advisable to craft policies for materials selection and retention, to establish scope and standards for purchasing and weeding. In selecting toys for public circulation, Neuman and Roskos recommend looking for “authenticity, utility, and appropriateness.”¹² The realia you select should

The USA Toy Library Association

Founded in 1985, the USA Toy Library Association (USA-TLA) provides

- conferences and seminars for toy librarians, child therapists, teachers, and others;
- information and educational materials to help start and operate a toy library, identify and create imaginative toys and play materials, and understand the relationship of play to early childhood development;
- the only online directory of toy-lending programs in the United States; and
- access to the International Toy Library Association (ITLA), a network of eighty countries’ toy lending programs and practitioners.

For more information on the USA-TLA, call 847-612-6966 or visit www.usatla.org.

also be safe (as proven by certification under the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act, provided by vendors), durable, relevant, adaptable to different uses, and accessible to different ability levels. Toys should represent diversity, appeal to multiple senses,¹³ and even relate to your special collections.¹⁴

Toy vendors that cater to early childhood and school markets are more likely than chain stores to offer sturdy, unique, and useful items. Toy collections should be weeded routinely, using the same process as for print material collections, and with special care for safety and cleanliness.

Remember that initial and yearly costs for toy collections are completely flexible and dependent upon general library operating and materials budgets. Starting small, paring down overgrown collections, and remaining small over many years can all be effective ways to provide access to toy and play opportunities for your community. No matter the size of your collection, be thoughtful and intentional about your selection, procedures, policies, storage, and marketing to make the most of your toy investment.

Consider whether you will keep all of your circulating toys on the public floor, or house some or all in staff-only areas. Large or heavy items, such as wooden toys and ride-on vehicles, may be too hazardous to store in public areas. Consider also whether you want your circulating toys to be available for play within the library. If you also provide non-circulating toys for in-house use,

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6. **Things can change without notice in schools.** Research projects come and go depending on curricular changes and teacher staffing. If the books you bought in response to a previous school project don't get taken out this year, it could be because the teacher who gave out that assignment has retired or changed grade levels, or something similar.
7. **School librarians are participants in the larger world of education reform.** Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS)? Race to the Top? No Child Left Behind? Data Teams? The programs seem to change with the office holders at state and federal levels.

What isn't changing is that schools and educators are under the microscope to improve the quality of education. As educational partners with classroom teachers, school librarians are part of this reform and in many cases have to comply with state and federal teacher evaluation programs and standards. But as these reforms are often politically based, today's practices may be abandoned next year.

Lastly, the Common Core is good for libraries. Yes, it's hard to ignore the controversy and debate over the CCLS, nor

should we. However, with its emphasis on student research, there is definitely a place at the table for librarians.

8. In smaller school districts, **the librarian usually does her or his own collection development.** Any resources or insights you have into new titles to add to the collection are welcome!
9. One of the most important things we can do is **work on simple ways to become advocates for one another's programs.** Both our worlds are marked by competition for resources and are always at risk for cutbacks. Together, we can flex our political muscles in a productive way.
10. **We really believe in what you do** and are continually impressed by the quality of the programming and services at public libraries! From summer reading, to helping families get library cards, to databases, the myriad offerings from public libraries are amazing, especially considering the limited budgets available. Thank you for all you do! 🐾

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such as kitchen play items or puzzles, be prepared for sorting challenges when these materials mix together.

Remember also to create and maintain a digital space for your toy collection. Library websites can be particularly useful for offering information about how to use different types of toys for developing particular skills in early childhood. Programs can serve this purpose as well, so consider how best to connect programming with your toy collection. Whether you promote your circulating toys in your existing programs or create entirely new programs to highlight your toy collection, always focus on unstructured free play opportunities and parent-child engagement.

Finally, advocate for your toy collection and for the importance of providing access to toys and playtime for all children. As children's library professionals, "We need to communicate to parents, library staff, and community leaders the value of play in young children's lives."¹⁵ Public library toy collections are a fun and valuable way to support early literacy for every child. 🐾

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