

STEP BY STEP GUIDE TO

Starting a Toy Lending Library

Creating Diverse, Low-Impact Playtime Opportunities for Kids



What Is a Toy Lending Library?

A toy lending library is a venue where parents, grandparents, and/or caregivers can go to borrow good-quality toys, puzzles, and games. These items may be borrowed and enjoyed at home—just like books from a lending library.

Because a toy lending library is able to provide a large selection, families have access to a wide range of quality toys.

Keep in mind that no two toy lending libraries are the same! There are, however, some basic approaches that have worked well for many communities. Check out this [nationwide list of toy lending libraries](#) and consider reaching out to one to learn from their experiences.

Key Steps

*Ready to take action in your community?
Here are some key steps to get a campaign started:*

STEP 1 Find interested community members.

1 Identify people in your community who may be excited by the idea of a toy lending library and want to help get it going. Talk to neighbors, friends, local parenting groups, and members of your congregation, school, or homeowners' association. Encourage them to get involved, either at the planning level or by contributing start-up funds and/or toys. Don't worry if your group is small—some libraries operate with as few as half a dozen members.

STEP 2 Hold a meeting and designate a core team

2 At your first meeting, discuss your vision for the library as well as the project's basic parameters. Will your library have a designated venue, or serve as a mobile unit? Will you serve certain age groups, or children with special needs? How many toys do you want to offer at first? Will you offer only indoor toys, or outside toys as well? Do you want to provide a play area? What would an ideal venue look like? Then, identify a core team to develop the project and designate key roles such as a membership and outreach coordinator, toy coordinator, volunteer coordinator, and financial and legal expert.

STEP 3 Set up the organizational structure.

3 Decide what form your library will take. Should it be its own nonprofit, a project of an existing organization like a public library or neighborhood association, or a more informal initiative maintained by motivated volunteers? If you wish to be affiliated with an existing organization, identify whom you'll need to contact for partnering. Consider your staffing needs: if you're planning a large project, having one full-time staffer (the toy coordinator) may be helpful to keep operations running smoothly.



Photo: Minneapolis Toy Library

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STEP 4 Find a location.

4 Ideally, a toy lending library should be a cheerful and welcoming place. The library should be easily accessible to users and adequately store the toy collection. Consider unused space in a community center, church, public library, or neighborhood clubhouse, which you may be able to use for a nominal amount. If you share premises with other users, provide lockable storage for the toys. Consider offering access to a play area, either indoor or safely enclosed outside. To ensure that the library space is safe for young children, install doors and gates with childproof mechanisms and attach shelves securely to the walls.

STEP 5 Identify whether you need a source of start-up funds.

5 To build the foundation for your library, you can begin by pooling a few toys from each interested family. Or, consider asking everyone involved in planning the library to pay a small membership subscription as a way to create a small fund for purchasing toys. Or, you can host a large toy drive in your community. The [Minneapolis Toy Library](#) did this, and solicited toys from moms' groups and neighborhood associations in their area. If you need more in the way of start-up funding, seek financial support from private foundations, businesses, and individuals. To cover ongoing costs, instate a membership fee for borrowing toys, or, at a minimum, charge late fees and replacement fees for lost or damaged items.

STEP 6 Collect your inventory.

6 Toys should be washable and well-made. They should be open-ended and require creativity to be fully imagined—such as blocks, play food, and dolls. Avoid toys with a media hook or that offer only one way to play with the item. Select toys that will develop a wide range of skills such as hand-eye coordination and gross and fine motor skills. Look for versatile toys that can be used by a wide age group. All toys must be safe; read and follow the suggested age recommendations. For children under the age of 3, avoid long pull cords, sharp edges, brittle plastic, and small or easily detached pieces. Avoid all toys made of toxic materials. Do routine safety checks of toys. Keep a good supply of spare pieces, which you can find secondhand, from the manufacturer, through online auction websites, or through donations of incomplete toys.



Photo: Minneapolis Toy Library

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STEP 7 Track your inventory.

Permanently write or engrave the library's name on all toys and include identification numbers for easy cataloging. Assign each borrower a unique ID, and use library software, a spreadsheet program, or a notebook for inventory and record-keeping. When toys are returned, check that they are intact. Create a catalog of all toys in your inventory, including the toy's identification number and a photo, which allows members to browse through the full range of offerings. Categorize the toys by age group and by toy type. To keep the inventory up to date, poll your membership regularly to assess their needs, and also include a suggestion box. Finally, create a donation policy or free box for passing on toys that you don't want to keep.

STEP 8 Draw up ground rules for borrowers.

Make a clear list of membership policies. Do borrowers need to be a certain age? How many toys can they borrow at a time? How long will the lending period last? Depending on the size of your inventory, you may decide to loan a set number of toys per family, or one expensive toy plus a number of smaller toys. (This would ensure wider access to the more expensive toys, and also limit your losses should the items not be returned.) At some libraries, members are required to volunteer, such as by helping out on-site, by assisting in fundraising, or by cleaning and repairing toys on their own time. Have the legal expert in your group draft a liability release form to be signed by all borrowers



STEP 9 Develop storage and maintenance strategies.

You may wish to store or display toys in numerical sequence; by category (dolls, puzzles, board games); or by age group, with toys for younger children on lower shelves. All members should be requested to return toys clean (be sure to include this in your lending policy). Keep some washcloths and a spray bottle on hand at the place of returns for members to use.

STEP 10 Build community connections.

A key benefit of a toy lending library is building community. Encourage members to use your own play area or to meet at a local playground. Approach community groups or small businesses that focus on teaching kids to see if they would volunteer to provide classes and workshops at the library. Create a newsletter for your library as a way to keep members informed of fundraising activities, new toys, and general items of interest. You can also use a newsletter to remind members of their obligations as well as make requests for volunteers.

MORE RESOURCES: Starting a Toy Lending Library

Web Resources

For more resources, be sure to check out the [USA Toy Library Association](#).

To learn more about the toy lending library featured, visit the [Minneapolis Toy Library](#).

Kids Unbranded

Check out more of New Dream's Kids Unbranded materials, including guides and action kits to provide parents and caregivers with practical tools to protect kids from intrusive and harmful advertising. Visit www.newdream.org/kidsunbranded

About the Center for a New American Dream

New Dream's mission is to improve well-being by inspiring and empowering all of us to shift the ways we consume. We seek to cultivate a new American dream—one that emphasizes community, ecological sustainability, and a celebration of non-material values. We envision a society that pursues not just "more," but more of what matters—and less of what doesn't. Learn more at www.newdream.org.

Tell us your stories! Did you find this Action Kit useful? Did you try any of our ideas with your family? Share your feedback by emailing us at newdream@newdream.org.



Photo: Minneapolis Toy Library

Featured Toy Lending Library: The Minneapolis Toy Library

The Minneapolis Toy Library is a volunteer-led, donation-based mobile lending library open to all families in the Minneapolis Area. They have three core team members, and these members are the primary decision makers. Tasks are divided based on the team members' strengths and interests.

One of the team members, who has a background in early childhood education, is responsible for both the inventory/check-out system as well as for categorizing the toys. This ensures that they have a wide variety of toys that engage children in educational play. The second team member focuses on outreach, communications, and long-term planning. The final member focuses on the library's lending policies. They have applied for a grant, which they plan to use as small stipends to pay the independent contractors who run their lending events.

For the Minneapolis Toy Library, securing a suitable space has been the biggest challenge. Because they wish to serve the entire Minneapolis community, they've had to move from one library to another across the city. And, as they've grown in members and toys, the need for space has become a huge priority. At the moment, the library operates as a mobile unit. They host lending events across the city, with one member storing all the toys in her basement and loading them into her car before each event.