



7

SMART PLAY

Having bought your toys and set up your regular toy loan sessions, you may want to think about offering play sessions to supplement your library's primary functions. There are many services you could provide, and the following paragraphs offer some tips on how to help play happen!

'Stay and Play' Sessions

Once you've established the principal toy loan functions of your library project you may want to think about expanding your services to include 'stay and play' sessions. Such sessions create important opportunities for children to play with other children, and thereby develop their social skills and language abilities. Additionally, this time enables parents / carers to meet, relax and offer informal support to one another over a cup of tea. 'Stay and Play' sessions are generally organised by the toy library to run alongside their toy loan service, and involves the provision of toys and play activities for children and their parents / users to participate in whilst attending regular toy loan meetings.

'Stay and Play' sessions are also educational and can place an emphasis on learning through play. They can offer a wide range of activities, including drawing, crafts, play dough, puzzles, access to sensory rooms or sensory activities (if available), toys for babies and older children, Lego, messy play, music, role play, themes (e.g. seasons, colours, Christmas) and many more!

Make Play Happen

If you are not yet offering play sessions in your toy library it may be best to start small - you can always expand your services as your library grows. When planning for play sessions you will need to consider the following factors:

- **Time** - if you have limited time and resources you could perhaps organise activities once a month or half-termly.
- **Space** - if space is limited within your chosen premises, try to use it as efficiently as possible. Try a play activity at just one table e.g. craft activities.

- **Cost** - if you find money is short for additional activities, try asking parents / carers to contribute any spare materials they may have around the home for modelling, dressing up and crafts.
- **People** - ask parents / carers for their ideas and suggestions for play activities. This will help provide a sense of ownership.

You could also ask parents / carers to help supervise play sessions, or perhaps run a session if they have any special interests or skills

Suggested Play Activities

There are numerous possibilities when it comes to play sessions within your toy library, and depending on the skills and interests of your volunteers or users, you may already have some ideas in mind. The following list offers some examples of play activities which your library could hold alongside toy loan sessions:

Homemade Playdough - Playdough is great way for children to refine motor skills - rolling out, cutting, pinching and making shapes, etc. It can be bought fairly cheaply but it's easy to make your own. (Recipe: 1 cup flour, 1 cup warm water, 2 teaspoons cream of tartar, 1 teaspoon oil, 1/4 cup salt, food colouring). You can let the children's imagination run wild with whatever they want to create, but one simple idea could be to make a caterpillar from rolled balls placed together

Plaster Hand and Footprints - Plaster is a great way for children to have some messy fun! All you will need is some plaster of Paris, 1 ¼ cups of water, some tins, mixing spoons and paper plates. Pour some plaster into the plate and get the child to press their hand or foot into the plaster, leave for one or two minutes and then remove. Then simply let the plaster to sit overnight until dry.

Learning Games - Educational skills which help children with their learning skills are a great idea for play sessions. This could include language games, such as name - spelling games or alphabet puzzles. Another good idea could be to organise a story telling session, and then have the children attempt to draw their favourite scene from the story!



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Outdoor Activities

Alongside indoor activities, you could also offer outdoor 'stay and play' sessions if you have the space and resources available. One idea could be 'water painting' - a great idea for children who love to draw and being creative. Give the children a bucket of water and a large paint brush and let them 'paint' the fence or wall. They will see it change colour with the water, but helpfully (for you!), will disappear when dry. If you are lucky enough to have outdoor equipment (climbing frames, swings, etc.) in the grounds of your library premises, you could also supervise the children whilst they play.

Organising a 'free play' session using scrap materials could be a viable option. 'Free Play' is a great way to encourage children's imaginative skills and creativity, and is often an easy form of play to initiate.

Additional Activities

In addition to 'stay and play' sessions, your toy library could also offer additional activities. This may include services such as baby massage, parenting support groups or music sessions. You could also invite professional visitors - dentists, fire-fighters, nurses - to join the meeting and give a short talk to the group.

Another idea could be to offer workshops or play guidance sessions which explain the value of play to parents / carers, or offer advice on how to play with children and the best ways to organise activities in the home environment.

Such activities are a great way to encourage parents / carers to interact with one another and offer moral support of assistance.

Top Tip

- Organise themed play sessions around an idea such as transport, water or colour, or a set of musical instruments.
- Some toy libraries make up 'play packs' for families to use at some, e.g. activities / items for children's birthday parties, etc.
- This is a good way to promote the value of play for children, and get parents / users to continue interacting through play after sessions have ended.
- If you are developing play sessions to run alongside your loans activity, it is advisable to buy separate sets of toys for this purpose.
- If you use your 'loan toys' there can be difficulties if a child is playing with a toy which another child wants to take home!



Smart Play Network Members Support

Member you have access to telephone and email support. For more information about the topics covered in this guidance sheet, or any other queries you may have about your group, please contact us using: 0131 554 2620 or admin@smartplaynetwork.org

It is free to be a member of Smart Play Network, for more information on how to become a member please refer to our website: www.smartplaynetwork.org.