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Toy Loan Program busier than ever

The L.A. County program operates much like a library -- children get to pick out a toy, play with it for a week, then return to swap it for another item. Demand is up 30% from last year.

By Esmeralda Bermudez

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At nearly 3 years old, the concept of borrowing is lost on Daniella Ferrer.

"*Prestado*," her grandma Maria Figueroa explains gently in Spanish. "Borrowed. The toy is borrowed. You have to give it back."

But Daniella, with her tangle of soft brown curls, grips the popcorn push toy with all her might, furrows her brows and sulks in defiance.

"Mine," she whispers back.

All around her, toddlers are learning the same lesson at the Toy Loan Center in Pico-Union. The site is one of 51 locations run by Los Angeles County's Department of Public Social Services. It works much like a library, lending new and used teddy bears, board games, action figures and dolls by the week to dozens of children as old as 12.

Toys, it seems, are low or nonexistent on the shopping lists of cash-strapped and unemployed parents. And the free [Toy Loan Program](#), founded during the Great Depression, is once again seeing a surge in popularity, with a 30% increase in borrowers compared with last year. New sites will open in South-Central, Pomona and other cities in coming months to meet the additional demand.

Each location is independently run by a "toybrarian" and a small crew of volunteers. The 45,000 toys available for play countywide were donated by residents, department employees and manufacturers such as Mattel.

From Compton to Hacienda Heights, little ones line up weekly with parents and grandparents at the centers to check out toys. For every five weeks of participation and on-time returns, children are rewarded with a new toy to keep. On the 20th week, kids win a big prize of their choice, such as a doll house or bike.

Daniella is having a hard time being a borrower. She sets her sights on a pink stroller to take home, but refuses to let go of last week's popcorn push toy.

"She'll learn," Figueroa says. "Eventually."

Along with giving children a chance to have fun, the program aims to teach some life lessons. By borrowing toys, kids learn about honesty, patience, responsibility and cleanliness, said the program's spokeswoman, Marcia Blachman-Benitez.

"It gives families something to do," she said. "Like going to the library or the park, it's an event."

Housed in the first floor of a low-income apartment building, the Pico-Union site opened only three weeks ago, but already nearly 80 children are on the toybrarian's list. Children stroll in three times a week to trade in their colorful loans. Once toys are inspected for damage, borrowers are set loose on the floor to choose from about 300 items.

On Wednesday, most children made a play date out of the morning as mothers stood by chatting and getting to know one another.

Maria Olivares sat on the floor playing with her 2-year-old. Since the 42-year-old lost her baby-sitting job five months ago, she has limited her spending to food and shoes for her three children. Toys are luxuries, even on birthdays and Christmas.

"I come here and I can breathe for a minute," said Olivares. "I can breathe in the middle of this crisis."

To donate or visit a Toy Loan Center, call (213) 744-4344.

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