

# CASE *study*: **MULTIPLE COUNTRIES**

(Albania, Bosnia Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Kosovo, Republic of North Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia\*)

## Roma Toy Library Network

### A Community for Roma Parents

**Authored by the Roma Education Fund (REF)**

\* REF Toy Libraries are expanding across Central, Eastern, South Eastern Europe and Turkey. Due to a variety of issues (ie. financial constraints, etc.), certain Toy Libraries may close temporarily and re-open at a later stage. Thus, the number of countries where REF Toy Libraries operate may fluctuate.

This material is part of a compilation of various case studies from across Europe that show different facets of early childhood development, and the types of policies and interventions that we are promoting through the 'First Years, First Priority' campaign.

**first years**  
*first priority*

**A FAIR START  
FOR *every* CHILD  
IN EUROPE**

## SUMMARY

The **Roma Education Fund** (REF) is an international foundation established in 2005 providing grants to reduce the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma<sup>1</sup> and contribute directly to UN Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 on “Quality Education<sup>2</sup>”.

One of REF’s most successful initiatives in countries with Roma populations have been **Toy Libraries**. In June 2016, REF organised the first International Toy Libraries Conference for practitioners working in Roma communities and also established the first **Roma Network of Toy Libraries**<sup>3</sup>. By 2017, REF had supported approximately 40 Toy Libraries in Central and Eastern Europe reaching around 1,450 families and 4,600 children<sup>4</sup>.

## PLAY AND TOY LIBRARIES

According to research, “*developmentally appropriate play with parents and peers is a singular opportunity to promote the social-emotional, cognitive, language, and self-regulation skills that build executive function and a pro-social brain*”<sup>5</sup>. In addition, play is crucial in supporting “*the formation of the safe, stable, and nurturing relationships with all caregivers that children need to thrive*”<sup>6</sup>. In the case of childhood adversity and stress, play becomes even more important in a child’s life<sup>7</sup>.

The first Toy Libraries started out as social projects in the United States in the 1920’s and 1930’s with the oldest continuously operating toy library being the Los Angeles County Toy Loan Program founded in 1935. The idea of this Toy Library originated from a dime-store operator who noticed that kids were stealing toys, and instead of reporting the incident to the police, decided to fill his garage with toys and lend them out<sup>8</sup>. In Europe, the first Toy Library opened in Denmark in 1959 and by 1960, UNESCO presented a plan to create Toy Libraries across the continent<sup>9</sup>. Nowadays, most countries have their national Toy Library Associations with collaboration at the European and international level. In terms of the legal framework<sup>10</sup>, Toy Libraries seek to implement ‘the right to leisure’ stated in Article 24<sup>11</sup> of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and ‘the right to play’ stated in Article 31<sup>12</sup> in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as ‘*essential in the overall development of children*’.

1 [REF Strategic Framework 2021-2030](#). Roma Education Fund. 2018. p.2, Available in English

2 [Quality Education](#). UN Sustainable Development Goals Website. Available in English

3 [Toy Libraries Conference “Reducing the gap in early childhood education of Roma: opportunities and obstacles for inclusion” in Belgrade](#). Central European Initiative. 09.06.2016 Available in English

4 “Roma Toy Library Network - Brochure”. Roma Education Fund. 28.04.2017

5 Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R. M., Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, & Council on Communications and Media. (2018). [The power of play: A pediatric role in enhancing development in young children](#). Pediatrics, 142(3), p.1

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Lange, Alexandra. “[Every City Should Have a Toy Library](#)”. The Atlantic. 9.11.2018

9 “[Documentation for Toy Libraries](#)”. European Toy Libraries Group. 2014. p.4

10 Ibid., p.11

11 [Article 24 - Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). United Nations Website. Available in English

12 [Article 31 - Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). UN Human Rights Website. Available in English

## REF TOY LIBRARIES

Since 2010, the Roma Education Fund (REF) has supported the establishment and operation of several Toy Libraries across Central and Eastern Europe. By 2017, Toy Libraries were operating in 13 countries, 450 Roma families were members, 4,350 young Roma children were using them, and some 3,500 high-quality educational toys and 2,500 story books were being made available<sup>13</sup>.

Due to the success of the initiative, REF organised the first international Toy Libraries Conference for practitioners working in Roma communities in Belgrade on 6-7 June 2016<sup>14</sup>. Supported by the CEI Cooperation Fund, the Toy Libraries Conference gathered librarians from 9 countries and 19 toy libraries, early childhood education experts, as well as members of international institutions. The **Roma Toy Library Network** aims to raise awareness on the importance of early childhood education of Roma children. The Network offers ongoing learning and professional support for its members and a platform of common advocacy operating at the national and international level.

In this context, the Toy Library is a community venue where children, families and care-givers can meet to borrow toys, puzzles and books that are designed to **support children's early development and learning**. The items from the library may be used in the venue, borrowed or taken home. It also provides an opportunity for parents to strengthen their **parenting skills** and to understand the role of play in the different stages of their children's development<sup>15</sup>. On the long run, the use of the toys and games with which the Toy Libraries are equipped provides for the basic skills of the children when they enter formal school (such as early math skills, early vocabulary, early stimulation and care etc.). At the same time, for those children affected by early school leaving, the use of the educational toys and games provides for an effective catching-up of the children's skills.

The establishment and operations of all Toy Libraries are guided by two main REF-prepared documents: '**Guidelines for Setting Up and Running a Toy Library**<sup>16</sup>' and '**Early Childhood Development Quality Assessment Tool for Toy Libraries**<sup>17</sup>'. While the first provides practical information about setting up and running a Toy Library, the second sets out a participatory process of quality assessment and improvement for all Toy Libraries to be useful, meaningful and welcoming for all families, including Roma. Based on experience, REF suggests the following first steps when opening a Toy Library:

1. Engage with the local community
2. Form a Toy Library Committee
3. Identify the target population
4. Choose a community-friendly location and layout
5. Select toys and books

Every Toy Library is adapted to meet local needs with core services and key elements existing in all REF Toy Libraries. In addition, while results may vary from country to country, there are a set of main benefits present in all Toy Libraries.

13 "Roma Toy Library Network - Brochure". Roma Education Fund. 28.04.2017

14 Toy Libraries Conference "Reducing the gap in early childhood education of Roma: opportunities and obstacles for inclusion" in Belgrade. Central European Initiative. 09.06.2016 Available in English

15 "Roma Toy Library Network - Brochure". Roma Education Fund. 28.04.2017

16 "Guidelines for Setting Up and Running a Toy Library". Roma Education Fund. 2018. Available in English

17 "ECD-QUAT for Toy Libraries: Quality Assessment Tool for Community-based Toy Libraries for Young Girls". Roma Education Fund. 2018. Available in English

### Core Activities

- “Stay and Play” community activities, Mobile Toy Library
- Mobile Toy Libraries for remote communities
- Borrowing/lending toys services, and
- Story reading sessions, literacy courses and Parents’ club (as additional activities that can be implemented around the service)

### Main benefits

- Improved parental practices
- Early stimulation of children through different toys
- Improved school readiness
- Improved interaction between parents and their child(ren), and
- Improved social and cognitive skills

## TRAINING, MONITORING AND EVALUATION METHODS

The Early Childhood Development Quality Assessment Tool for Toy Libraries (**ECD-QUAT for Toy Libraries**) has been developed by REF and the International Child Development Initiatives (ICDI) in close consultation with toy library assistants and coordinators in the countries in which REF Toy Libraries operate<sup>18</sup>. It is structured around **four underpinning principles** and **six standards** and components which define quality practice in Toy Libraries:

### Principles

1. Play
2. Equality
3. Diversity
4. Parents

### Standards

1. Child-friendliness
2. Connectedness
3. Safety, health and protection
4. Staffing and human resources
5. Sustainability, has a number of associated component parts
6. Agency

The ECD-QUAT for Toy Libraries helps Toy Library staff support the professional development of assistants. Its participatory approach encourages involvement of all various stakeholders in measuring and improving the quality of the toy library. It also provides a framework to compare Toy Libraries, thereby encouraging peer learning.

18 “ECD-QUAT for Toy Libraries: Quality Assessment Tool for Community-based Toy Libraries for Young Girls”. Roma Education Fund. 2018. p.2, Available in English

## PRACTITIONER TRAINING AND ENGAGEMENT OF THE BENEFICIARIES

The most important resource in the Toy Library is the **library assistant(s)**<sup>19</sup>. (S)he is responsible for the day-to-day running of the Toy Library, which includes getting to know and building strong relationships with member families (parents and children); providing advice to parents about play and child development; demonstrating toys and games, as well as being in charge of the daily administration connected to borrowing and returning toys. Primarily, (s)he needs to be very enthusiastic about the power of play in children's lives and be able to communicate this to families. It is preferred that (s)he comes from the same community where most of the members live, to ensure trust and closer relationships with the members.

REF recommends the presence of two library assistants during opening hours, with extra support provided by volunteers, who could be parents and committed members. REF provides in-service training for Toy Library committees and assistants including:

- Training on setting up and day-to-day administration
- Toys and games literacy for different ages
- Stay and play sessions
- Monitoring and evaluation tools included in the ECD-QUAT for Toy Libraries Framework, and
- Ongoing mentoring throughout the implementation.

REF supports local 'implementing partners'<sup>20</sup> to establish Toy Libraries in targeted areas with a grant for the first year of operation. REF also seeks to support Toy Libraries becoming self-sufficient in the long-run through local community engagement, donations, lobbying activities, and other types of funding. Implementing partners are encouraged to take responsibility for collaborating with the local municipality, setting up a Toy Library Committee, engaging the local population, and developing a long-term vision. Most Toy Libraries have now become self-financing.

To be successful, Toy Libraries must be easily accessible to families with young children. Mobile Toy Libraries work well when families live in remote areas. Community centres, kindergartens or schools also serve as ideal locations for a toy library. Toy libraries are very often be coupled with other kinds of support for parents, such as parenting advice, reading sessions, women's group etc.

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19 "Guidelines for Setting Up and Running a Toy Library". Roma Education Fund. 2018. p.10, Available in English

20 'Implementing partners' are often local NGO and civil society actors but in some cases, they are local municipalities and schools

## Lessons learnt and recommendations

Based on experience in multiple countries, Toy Libraries have many positive features, namely:

- 1. Integration:** Toy Libraries can be easily integrated into any educational or developmental programme if specific space of operation is provided (i.e. as part of cultural centres, after-school programmes and other programmes such as Sure Start).
- 2. Cost-effective investment:** One of the main advantages of the programme is that with relatively low financial investment, great results can be achieved for young children and their families.
- 3. Sustainability:** Toy Libraries can be easily integrated into the life of the local community and provide a positive impact on the life of young children and their families.
- 4. Effective Partnerships:** Toy Libraries are successful in creating close partnerships with kindergartens and municipalities. They can influence local teachers and the educational programme of the kindergarten through an exchange of educational tools and activities.
- 5. Integrated approach:** Toy Libraries also collaborate with Roma assistants, mediators, and state institutions on behalf of the Roma community when policies fail to be implemented or do not exist.
- 6. Advocacy:** While every country differs in their respective advocacy efforts, the next phase for the Roma Toy Library Network is to identify community needs, ideas and suggestions to be addressed at the local and national level, which in turn, can contribute to effective policy-making.
- 7. Parental Platforms** (upcoming initiative): REF aims to establish Parental Platforms (PP) through professional community organisers from 2020. PPs seek to: engage Roma parents and adults in educational policy issues; bridge the interest of Roma and non-Roma parents; and provide direct recommendations to local level stakeholders for inclusive measures. PP is a pilot initiative which, if successful, will further expand to other countries where REF operates. This initiative envisages to improve parents' involvement in shaping educational policy.



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## The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.
- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.
- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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**National Coordinators:** Pomoc Deci (Serbia), Plataforma de Infancia (Spain), Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Portugal), Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), Family, Child, Youth Association (Hungary), Child Rights Alliance (Ireland), Trust for Social Achievement (Bulgaria), Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (Romania), Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance (France).