


Keeping toys in play

What We Learned from Hosting a
Roundtable with the U.S.'s Top Toy
Companies & Sellers

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At the Closed Loop Center for the Circular Economy, we see a future in which keeping toys in play for multiple lifecycles could be scalable, sustainable, and profitable for toy brands and value chain partners, and the norm for U.S. households.

That's why we convened key players from across the toy value chain—from manufacturers to recovery networks and retailers—for a collaborative discussion.

Bringing the value chain together to unpack and reimagine the lifecycle of toys

Toys are more than just playthings. They are vessels of learning and joy (and durable value!). Yet, the lifecycle of most toys in the U.S. is alarmingly short.

80%

of toys end up in landfills, incinerators, or nature, contributing to pollution and resource wastage¹

¹Source: [ecoBirdy](#)

90%

of toys are made from plastic, often combining materials that complicate any current recycling efforts

6 months

is the average lifespan of a toy, after which many are discarded



Why do so many of the toys that spark our children's imagination, inspire their creativity, and create cherished memories end up as waste after an average use of only six months?

At Circularity 25, the Closed Loop Center facilitated a workshop with prominent toy value chain players to discuss this motivating question, identify the barriers to supporting reuse, and consider how the industry might benefit from building a circular future in which toys are kept in play for the enjoyment of many children. This report highlights our learnings from this discussion.

Today's toy recovery systems

Today, brand focus is largely on recycling...

Current brand-driven toy take-back efforts predominantly focus on recycling toys. These programs often overlook the potential to deliver more value to customers and capture new markets through repair, resale, and reuse.



...while uncaptured secondary markets demonstrate consumer desire for reuse.

Unofficial reuse networks—like parent groups or “Buy Nothing” communities on social media platforms—thrive without brand involvement, data-driven insights, or quality control. Brands lack the mechanisms to participate in, support, and benefit from these channels.

I Vowed to Buy (Almost) Nothing New for My Baby. Here's How I Did It.

The New York Times

An Antidote to Inflation? 'Buy Nothing' Groups Gain Popularity

These groups are having a moment, adding some two million participants in the past year as prices rise and concerns grow over waste

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



Barriers to brand-led repair, resale, and reuse

“How would we?”



Regulatory Uncertainty

The absence of guidelines and incentives for refurbished toy quality and safety complicates industry-wide adoption.



Operational Challenges

Establishing reverse logistics, repair infrastructure, and quality assurance systems requires significant investment and coordination.



Safety and Liability Concerns

Brands express apprehension about safety, recalls, and reputational risks associated with refurbished or resold toys without established third-party standards or certifications.

“Why should we?”



Unclear Business Case

Individually, brands struggle to demonstrate the strategic advantage of circular models, hindering internal buy-in. Historically, there have been examples of toy repair networks and programs that have proven profitable, but offshoring has limited this more recently.



Limited Consumer Engagement

Minimal investment in marketing and consumer education restricts the expansion of brands' existing toy recovery programs due to lack of visibility and participation, creating a vicious cycle.

Key Opportunity Drivers for Toy Circularity



Recent trade and geopolitical volatility has highlighted the **vulnerabilities of the toy industry's global manufacturing dependencies**. With most toys produced overseas (~80% are imported from China²), rising transportation costs, delayed timelines, and fluctuating import fees have forced manufacturers to rethink their operating models. **In this environment, keeping toys in circulation longer through successive sales is a potential source of profit and a meaningful sustainability lever.**

² Source: [Toy Association](#)



In our workshop, a key insight emerged: customers don't know the brands behind the toys—they only know the **iconic toys**. This consumer mindset primes the market for cross-brand take-back programs. Third-party refurbishers, certified to meet industry-developed standards for safety, cleanliness, and performance, could ensure every product is play-ready. **Leveraging these dynamics opens collaborative opportunities across competitor brands that are less accessible for individual brands to capture.**

Why Advance Toy Circularity?

Imagine a world with a vibrant, brand-agnostic resale platform for refurbished toys, all marked with a reassuring “Keeping Toys in Play Certified” badge, denoting quality and safety verified by third-party providers. Collaboration can make this world possible. How could a platform like this generate value and drive progress across the value chain?



Reduce Environmental Impact

Waste Mitigation: Prioritizing reuse and repair over recycling minimizes waste generation and conserves resources.

Carbon Footprint Mitigation: Extending the lifespan of toys reduces the need for new production, lowering greenhouse gas emissions associated with manufacturing processes.

Supporting Evolving Consumer Behavior: A significant portion of consumers, particularly younger demographics, prioritize environmental responsibility in their purchasing decisions.

Sustain Profitable Growth

Revenue Stream Diversification: Participating in the resale market allows brands to capture value from products beyond the initial sale, tapping into the growing secondhand economy.

Regulatory Alignment & Protection: Proactively adopting circular practices positions brands favorably in anticipation of potential future Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) regulations and sustainability mandates.

Deepen Connection with Consumers

Emotional Resonance: Toys hold sentimental value. Programs that facilitate the repair or resale of cherished toys can strengthen customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Accessibility & Affordability: Offering refurbished toys at lower price points makes products more accessible, expanding market reach.

Educational Initiatives: Engaging consumers through storytelling and education about circularity can drive behavioral change and participation. This applies both to consumers and employees—it takes the whole ecosystem to change cultural norms.

Strengthen Operations & Resilience

Data-Driven Transparency & Design: Systems such as Digital Product Passports can provide transparency through data on product usage, durability, and failure points—informing design improvements.

Local Repair Ecosystems: Partnering with local repair shops can build decentralized repair networks, support local economies less affected by tariffs, and reduce logistical complexities.

Standardization & Certification: Developing industry-wide standards and certification programs for refurbished toys can ensure quality and safety, building consumer trust.

Together, we can keep toys in play and build a more sustainable future for generations to come.

The Closed Loop Center for the Circular Economy

is committed to supporting stakeholders in this journey—providing expertise, facilitating collaboration, and driving systemic change.

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