

**Meet the women who give children in their communities easy access to . . .**



**SIMPLE SOLUTION:** Andrea Britt with daughters Grace, left, and Amelia, playing with their rented toys. Picture: RUVAN BOSHOFF

**SUTHENTIRA GOVENDER**

SISTERS Amelia and Grace Britt behave like its Christmas every month when their bag of rented toys arrives at their door. Their mother, Andrea, is saving money and time through a growing phenomenon in South Africa — toy rental. The rent-to-play trend is not new to Britain and Europe, where rented playthings have become popular with parents who need to find a way to get rid of boxes of unwanted toys.

Britt, a Cape Town business-woman, rents toys for her daughters, aged two and four, for R199 a month, to stimulate, entertain and educate them.

“The biggest fan has been our nanny, who is thrilled with the roster of toys and provides a lot of feedback to the team about what the girls like,” she said.

Toy rental company Smart Toy Club was born when Cape Town mothers Lyneve Pieterse and Sarah Brown found themselves struggling to keep up with escalating toy prices.

Each month parents get a bag of age-appropriate toys for children between the ages of six months and five years.

The bag — rented for R199 a month — contains four to six top-brand toys with a retail value of between R700 and R1 000.

“We choose toys based on parents’ requests, their children’s likes or dislikes, coupled with age appropriateness. We have more than 150 clients and this number will grow as we have just expanded our service nationally,” Brown said.

The two women are mindful of

hygiene. “The cleaning of the toys is a critical part of our process and we ensure that the toys are sterilised before they go out to new families,” Brown said.

Toys that are worn but still usable are donated to the Zandile Kidz Empowerment Centre in Khayelitsha.

Britt described her toy rental deal “as a mini-Christmas every month”.

She said: “Right now we get a mixed bag for both girls. I buy a lot less toys and while I think the money saved must be significant . . . for me it is very much

**“We also loan toys out to crèches in the area. Most of them can’t afford toys and books**

about not contributing to more clutter in the world.”

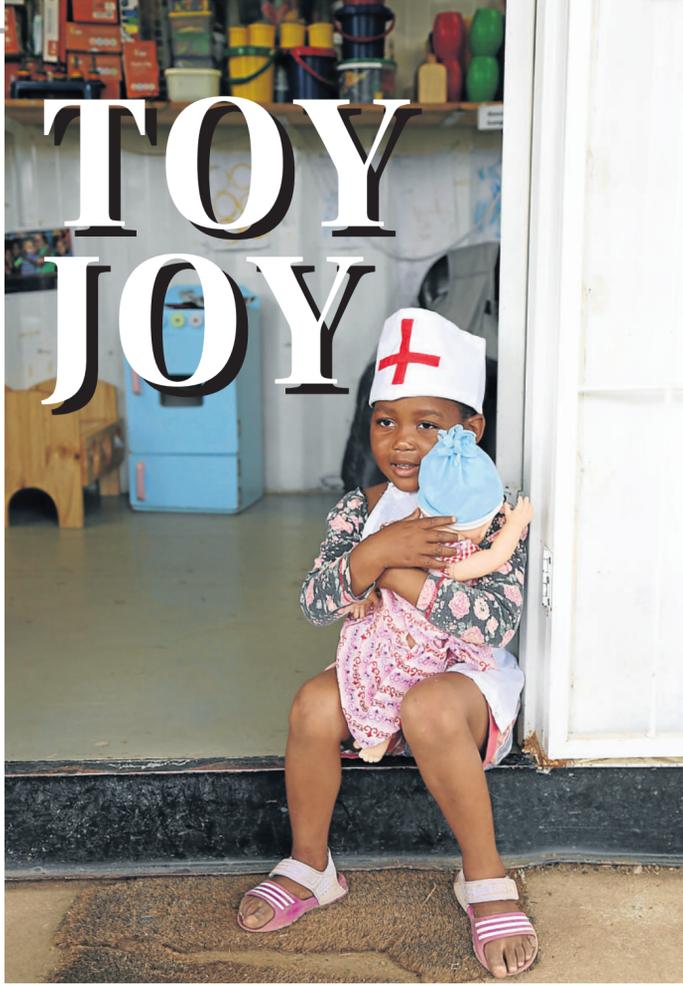
The concept played “straight into a sharing economy, where we don’t have to own everything that we use”, said parenting expert Nikki Bush.

“Parents are always looking for fresh ideas.

“Every month they will be able to expose their children to different things. Children in the early age group have a short attention span.”

Little Munchkins Soft Play in Port Elizabeth offers sensory play stations — used mainly for toddler play dates — for rent at about R400 for eight hours.

“Sensory play includes any



**ROLE-PLAY:** Esona Smith, 4, plays at the Mpophomeni toy library

Pictures: JACKIE CLAUSEN

activity that stimulates a young child’s senses through touch, smell, taste, sight and hearing,” said owner Natalie Bruce.

Her sensory play stations include a table, four chairs, play dough, edible coloured sand and fruit loop bangles.

For those who can’t afford to rent or buy, toy libraries — usually run by non-profit organisations — are giving joy to children in far-flung areas.

Midlands Community College, a non-profit organisation based in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, has established toy libraries in Loskop, Bruntville and Mpophomeni.

More than 200 children visit

the Mpophomeni toy library — a container stocked with dolls, cars, dress-up outfits, puzzles, games and books — each month.

“We also loan toys to crèches in the area. Most can’t afford toys and books. This toy library gives them an opportunity to expose children to early-development toys,” said toy librarian Pretty Mpungose.

Cotlands, an early-childhood development NPO, has six fixed toy libraries and three mobile libraries providing children in rural areas with a chance to play with science games, art and craft material, bats and balls, matching and sorting games as

well as construction toys.

“A toy library is a high-impact, cost-effective way to give children, their families and teachers in underprivileged communities access to carefully selected educational material,” said CEO Jackie Schoeman.

Bush said: “In an under-resourced school, toy libraries will help children to develop the visual perceptual skills necessary to making sense of the world around them.”

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**VETKOEK AND VEGGIES:** Ntombenhle Mtambo in her organic garden

Picture: JACKIE CLAUSEN

**Township food garden that inspired a cookbook**

**SHELLEY SEID**

THERE is a garden in the heart of Mpophomeni, a township just outside Howick in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands, filled with organic vegetables, flowers, herbs, seedlings and compost heaps. And, if locals are to be believed, it is the place of legendary vetkoek.

Once a month, Vetkoek Friday attracts people eager to savour 47-year-old Ntombenhle Mtambo’s delicious vetkoek with a broad-bean curry and a rainbow salad.

Two years ago the garden was an empty piece of unloved land, a dump site for plastic bottles, garbage bags and builders’ rubbish.

Mtambo saw its potential. But it took eight years to convince the municipality to give her permission to clean up the rugby-field-sized plot and turn it into a garden that would not only feed the sick and poor, but become a lively business that today supplies high-quality organic produce to restaurants, hotels, shops and surrounding communities.

Mtambo runs a monthly pop-up restaurant that has become popular with locals and tourists, and manages to squeeze in permaculture training workshops.

Permaculture is a system of agriculture using the patterns found in nature to promote sustainability. Those who know

Mtambo call her the Queen of Permaculture.

Her determination to create this food bounty has had other spin-offs — her recipes have appeared in two cookbooks and in September she travelled to the Slow Food conference in Italy, held every two years.

Ten years ago she worked as a volunteer at the local clinic, caring for those with HIV.

She learnt to plant the “old-fashioned way”, as she calls it, and when she visited the sick would take her produce and

**“Ntombenhle has been very influential in the township. The gardening bug has spread**

cook for them. She also began showing people how to create door-sized veggie gardens.

In 2010, Mtambo was employed by the Midlands Meander Education Project to help schools establish food gardens and as part of her job was sent to Cape Town-based NGO Seed, where she learnt basic permaculture.

“Permaculture is the best way to save our planet. We copy nature, we do not use pesticides and there is no waste,” she said.

Today, the plot is chock-a-block with produce. She provides a burger outlet with lettuce, Dovehouse Organics farm shop with fennel, and Oaklands Country Manor, an upmarket, farm-based guesthouse in Van Reenen, with beetroot and cabbages.

Caroline Bruce, who runs Oaklands, said it began its permaculture project two years ago, which included creating food gardens in the nearby village. “Ntombenhle came along to do the initial training and comes back periodically to help us maintain. We often buy from her. She is a remarkable woman.”

And the ball keeps rolling. The garden was the inspiration for a new cookbook, *Mnandi: a taste of Mpophomeni*.

Compiled by environmentalist Nikki Brighton, it is an ode to fresh, seasonal eating and features recipes of members of the Mpophomeni Conservation Group, a loose collective of food growers, seed savers and environmental activists, all motivated by Mtambo’s garden.

Brighton said the garden had become an icon. “It is where the group meets, it is like our head office. Ntombenhle has been very influential in the township. The gardening bug has spread, thanks to her. She is an exceptional example of what can be achieved.”