CUSTOMERS who shop with children in tow are not only difficult to sell to, they can also end up costing a retail business money – if a child is injured in a shop, the retailer can be held liable.

Former retailer Anne Doyle started her business Child Friendly Solutions after experiencing the frustration of trying to sell to customers in her own store. When her own nine-month-old baby had to have a toy block surgically removed after choking on it in a shop, she knew she was onto a winner.

Child Friendly Solutions makes play centres designed to keep children occupied and safe in shops. The colourful play panels can be mounted on a wall, column or the back of a change-room door.

Co-director Michelle Barraclough says retailers often watch sales slip away as distracted parents chase their children out of stores. They also have cause for concern over the damage children can do to merchandise and themselves.

Ms Barraclough says parents usually grab what they need and leave the store without browsing or even having the chance to buy on impulse – a major source of profit for retailers.

"Women who shop with their children tend not to try anything on or make a purchase, because children tend to run under the change-room door while the mother's half naked and it all just becomes too hard," Ms Barraclough says, adding that the play panel can be used for retailers to use as a sales tool to attract and retain customers in the store.

Most retailers acknowledge the benefits of having a child-friendly store but Ms Barraclough says it's not good enough to simply buy a box of toys or a small table and chairs with a few crayons and put them in the corner.

"They are a choking and tripping hazard which can lead to costly legal action," she says. Loose toys must be regularly tidied up, washed and checked, she adds.

Ms Doyle and Ms Barraclough, both mothers, started Child Friendly Solutions six years ago and now their play centres can be found in retail outlets, car dealerships, and they will soon be in Westpac banks.

Another five products are in development for the company but the pair's focus this year is exporting to the US and UK.

Child-friendly … Jack test drives a play panel for business owner mum Michelle Barraclough. Picture: John Fotiadis