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Library encourages interaction between city children, parents

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A large commotion swept through the main branch of the Evanston Public Library Saturday.

The soothing voices of parents blanketed the scurrying of about 20 little feet trying to avoid the wipe of a runny nose, the shouts and cries of a fight brewing over plastic kitchen toys, and the clang of dried macaroni woven into necklaces.

But the librarians didn't hush the noise — they encouraged it.



PATRICK MARKAN/THE DAILY NORTHWESTERN

Mae Luning, 19 months old, plays during a workshop with her mother at the Evanston Public Library's main branch.

The public library, 1703 Orrington Ave., is one of many libraries nationwide that hosts the Parent/Child Workshop, a program that offers a free interactive learning environment for families with children under age 3.

Each session includes about an hour of crafts, singing and "free play" — a social time where children interact with parents and other children while playing with developmentally appropriate toys — said Janice Bojda, director of Evanston's Parent/Child Workshop.

"Children do 100 percent of their learning through interaction with their environment, especially in the 1- to 3-year-old ages," said Bojda, head of children services at the Main Library.

Leslie Luning brought her 19-month-old daughter, Mae, to the workshop because Mae is an only child.

"I like to bring her places where she's with other kids," Luning said. "These interactions are essential."

The program is a learning tool for parents, too. The library partners with outside agencies in the community to bring in childcare experts who offer advice on a range of issues such as language development, diet and nutrition, social and emotional development, and literacy, Bojda said.

"Parents can also learn from each other," Bojda said. "They can see how another parent handles a tantrum or a difficult situation."

Sandra Feinberg, director of Middle Country Public Library in Centereach, N.Y., founded the Parent/Child Workshop in 1979 after having her first child. There was a desperate need for a program involving young children and their parents, she said.

"At the time, no one had toys in libraries," Feinberg said. "I was determined to do something for children, and really for parents."

The first workshop was an instant success. With the help of Libraries for the Future, an organization dedicated in part to the renewal of libraries, the Parent/Child Workshop was launched as the core program of Family Place Libraries, the network of U.S. libraries that encourages literacy through early learning.

"It was totally unexpected," said Feinberg of the program's popularity at Middle Country. "We're just like Evanston, a local public library."

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Today librarians receive training from Middle Country before they start their own Parent/Child Workshops. After that, the program's leaders travel the country to check on the progress of the workshops.

Evanston's Parent/Child Workshop now has 45 children and their families enrolled.

"Our evaluations on this particular program have been really positive for us," Bojda said.

For some parents, the one-on-one time with their child is what makes the program invaluable.

"It's the one day I have time to spend with him," said David Chan, referring to his 17-month-old son, Nathan.

Three-year-old Sanjanna Lakshminarayan spent the hour resting on her father's leg as he read her a book. Reading and spending time with her dad was not just a learning experience — it was fun, too.

"What should we play now?" Sanjanna asked after they finished the book, giving her dad just enough time to catch his breath before they did the Hokey-Pokey and sang the good-bye song.

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