PLAY WITH PURPOSE

WICHITA FALLS PUBLIC LIBRARY ESCHews THE TRADITIONAL LIBRARY ARCHETYPE, OFFERING AN EARLY LEARNING AREA WITH TOYS, PARENT/CHILD WORKSHOPS – AND NOISE.

by elizabeth york | photos by lindsey sullivan photography and provided by wfpl
Grand columns mark the way for visitors to the double doors of the Wichita Falls Public Library. Neat landscaping and stately flags denote the downtown traditional multi-purpose building. Inside the library, however, visitors find more than traditional rows of books with quiet patrons. There is an early learning area where a mini house, train and block tables, and educational toys accompany board books. The earliest learners are brought by their parents and caregivers to facilitate the foundational skills needed for pre-literacy development.

Library Information and Operations Supervisor Kathy Vossler was the impetus behind creating the new play space. "We still have people getting used to the idea of noise in the library, but, by and large, the comments have been very positive," she said. "Parents and children just love it. When I was a young parent, I probably wouldn't have thought about taking my very young child to the library. I think we're changing the way people think about public libraries."

hometown living at its best
"WE REALLY APPRECIATE THAT THE LIBRARY PUTS THIS ON AND THAT PEOPLE CARE SO MUCH."

- Sarah Lyda

Sarah and Chris Lyda share a book with their son Jackson.

Celena Bradley & Kathy Vossler discuss the Parenting Collection.
The early learning space and parent/child workshops are the result of WFPL's alliance with Family Place Libraries. The New York-based organization, in partnership with the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, provided a grant-funded means to promote healthy development, and to teach precursors to reading like awareness of sounds and print.

When Vossler learned of an opportunity to reach out to the families of infants, she was excited. "I thought, 'We have to be part of this.' The FPL concept builds upon the idea that children begin learning at birth," she said. "It isn't something that libraries have focused on traditionally, but it makes a lot of sense."

When her grant application was approved, Vossler attended training in 2015 provided by Family Place Libraries. Then, WFPL Youth Services Librarian Celena Bradley attended the following spring. They learned more about children's educational progression, and how they could bring the useful FPL service to the children and families of Wichita Falls.

They arranged for the supplies and set-up of the emergent learner space, and Vossler and Bradley prepared for the first workshop in the fall of 2016. Bradley recruited volunteers who could represent their areas of expertise. The volunteers came each week to cover a different topic. They included a pediatrician, nutritionist, speech language pathologist, play therapist, and a health department representative. Parents were offered a morning or afternoon slot for the free, five-week program.

Sarah Lyda, her husband, Chris, and their son, Jackson, were among the attendees in the fall workshop. "I thought, going into it, that it was just going to be about Jackson," Sarah Lyda said. "Actually, I think we got more out of it."

As first-time parents, the Lydas were able to consult with the specialists and learn more about their son's developmental stages. "It's such great information that you wouldn't find anywhere else," Lyda said. "A lot of his toys were singing and light-up toys. After the classes, we bought stackable blocks and rings. It's a different type of playing with no TV or distractions. We learned that's how they learn."
Chris Lyda with his son Jackson at the Exploratory station.

"WE HOPE EACH PERSON WHO VISITS WILL FEEL A CONNECTION TO THE LIBRARY."
- Celena Bradley

Early Learning Space
Vossler echoes the importance of playtime and reading time during which parents put devices like phones away. "From birth to age three is the fastest period of brain development," she said. "We want parents to take advantage of this very important time."

While caregivers and children gain a good deal from the program, they also connect with experts in case they need further guidance outside of the sessions. "There are many community resources they may not be aware of," Vossler said.

One of the main takeaways parents have gained from the workshops is connections with other parents. The Lydas had such a positive experience with experts and other families that they attended the second offering in the spring of 2017. "We got so much out of it," Sarah Lyda said. "We really appreciate that the library puts this on and that people care so much."

The program is meant to be as fun as it is educational, Bradley said. "Many parents have a fear: 'Am I doing this right?' We help answer questions and give them tools so that they're not bogged down in worrying, and are free to really enjoy their children," she said.

There are currently two five-week sessions held in the spring, and again in the fall. Vossler and Bradley would like to see the program offerings and services grow with time. The need for volunteers will likely grow as the program grows.

The educational play space is set up year-round for use by library patrons. Also in the early learning space is a section devoted to parenting and child development books and DVDs that can be checked out, as well as informational handouts on local medical care, counseling and more.

Ideally, families who come to the library will come back for years to come, said Bradley. "We hope each person who visits will feel a connection to the library. Wichita Falls residents who don't already have a library card are encouraged to apply for a free card," she said. "The idea of libraries being quiet places where young children can't come has gone the way of the dinosaur. We want children to feel comfortable coming here. We want to build a relationship and to offer services for the entirety of their lives."

For more information, call 940-767-0868, or visit www.wfpl.net and www.familyplacelibraries.org.