

Family Place areas at two Stark library branches turn interactive play into learning sessions

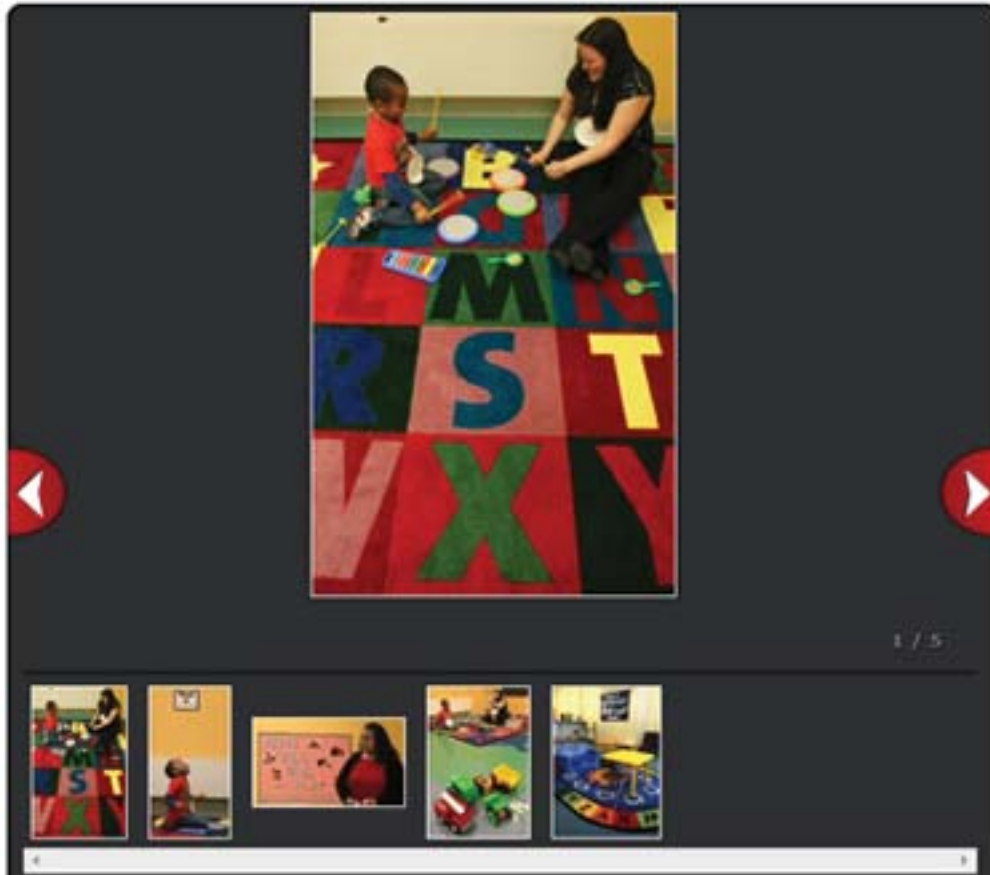
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CANTON: When 10-month-old Michael Collier picked up plastic dinosaurs, it looked like he was simply having fun exploring new toys.

When 4-year-old Dayne Bryant greeted fellow 4-year-old Thomas Rohrig with, "Hi. What's your name?" it seemed he was just curious about a newcomer to the children's programming room at the Stark County District Library.

But the adults who set the stage for those interactions knew their activities had a deeper purpose. They were getting the boys ready for school, taking advantage of the crucial stage between birth and the preschool years.

"It feels like play, but there's really important work taking place," said Jean Duncan McFarren, director of the Stark district main library. "There's a lot of brain research that has been done recently that indicates that's when a lot of brain development takes place."

The main library and the Madge Youtz Branch, at 2921 Mahoning Road NE, have been designated Family Place Libraries. They offer inviting places for play, discovery and learning for children under 3 and others in the preschool years.

During normal library hours, young children and their caregivers can park themselves in a cozy nook defined by low bookshelves where even tiny patrons can crawl to the board books. There are clean toys geared toward preschoolers' interests, and right-sized chairs and tables.

The kids' corners were funded with about \$8,200 in grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, an agency of the federal government. The institute also provided training for library staff.

The family library concept includes play-based programs in which librarians and child development experts from the community interact with parents and children.

"It's support for the parents and modeling for the parents what they can do," said Rose Marie Green, youth services manager for the main library. "We have the overall goal of getting all parents down on the floor playing with their kids."

Even infants can show the adults what they need to learn. When the baby throws her rattle on the floor, you give it back to her. She throws it down again, her expression asking you to pick it up again.

The game teaches "object permanence," Green said. "They are making the connection that even though something is no longer in their sight line, that it still exists.

"Of course, being the library, we try to tie into literacy," Green said.

Small toys in the infant area and the building blocks for bigger kids develop fine-motor skills they will need for holding pencils.

Kimberley Bryant, who brought her son Dayne to the library, appreciated Tuesday's parent-child workshop. Most of his toys are in storage due to a recent move to Canton from Billings, Mont.

"He has been looking for something to do, where he could come and play," she said. "I wish we had known about it earlier."

The library's first parent-child workshops were in early March. Tuesday's was the last for a few months. More are planned for fall, with that schedule to be determined.

While Dayne had the chance to use drums, finger-paint and play with others, his mother learned about local resources for children from Kim Labriola, an early childhood consultant with Child and Adolescent Behavioral Health.

Labriola said the parent-child workshops help her agency in two ways: They spread information about available services to families and give staff a place to send parents to have enriching experiences with their children.

But as all that work was taking place, Dayne was evaluating the library program's success on his own terms.

"I never want to leave," he said.

For more information about the program, call the library at 330-452-0665.

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