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Beth El Congregation opens a new children's play center

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Suzanne Elliott / Staff

Jessica Dennis, an employee at Stay 'n Play, keeps an eye on the children.

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When Beth El Congregation of the South Hills closed its nursery school in December 2012, members and mothers Randi Daffner and Bonnie Gordon felt something was missing – namely a place where the mothers could spend some quality time with their young children. Both Daffner and Gordon decided to take matters into their own hands and drafted the services of two friends, Karen Frank and Lori Nemec, also members of the congregation.

Together, the four friends, all South Hills mothers, came up with the idea of starting Stay 'n Play, an indoor play space for children age 6 and younger in Beth El's former nursery school space. The center opened in mid-November in Beth El's Sadie and Herman Spigel religious school. Caregivers are required to stay with the children at Stay 'n Play.

"The congregation is thrilled to offer this to outlying communities," said Steve Hecht, executive director of Bethel El. "When the nursery school closed, it left a gap."

Even though Stay 'n Play's organizers had access to space and equipment from the nursery school, getting started was a whole different story.

The four organizers had to sort, wash and decide which of the leftover nursery school toys to keep and use. More importantly, they had to decide how to lay out the space.

"It was a beautiful space just sitting there," said Gordon, the mother of two, Lydia, 2, and Max, 5.

Because they planned to cater to a wide age range – infants to 6-year-olds – they knew the space had to be segmented in order to be used by everyone. They also knew young children have to blow off steam and need an area where they can run, Gordon said.

"It is important to have organized areas, not just along the lines of boys and girls," Gordon said. "Each area has to have a purpose."

At Stay 'n Play, each area does have a special purpose. The center itself is made up of two separate rooms. The bigger of the two rooms serves as the center's play area. In this room, there are kiddie cars and bikes, plus a jungle gym and other large toys that children can safely climb on. That room also doubles as a birthday room where parties can be held, said Daffner, the mother of Madelyn, 17 months, and the stepmother of Abby, 7.

The brightly colored learning room contains a smorgasbord of activities for children, all designed to encourage learning and creativity. The toddler area has board books with thick pages that make it easy for young children.

Next to the toddler area is a craft area, where children can make a new craft every day. There is a dress-up area, where children can put on clothes and pretend to be a grown-up, doctor, monster or super hero, Gordon said.

The center has a sensory table, where children can put their hands in and feel different things. On this particular day, the table had plastic confetti and animals. The children can also put on a puppet show, or play with a model train set.

Stay 'n Play, whose tagline is "Grow Together" employs six part-time workers, all of whom have college degrees and experience with children. The center, which has a security door that limits access to the building, is open from 9 a.m.-1 p.m., Monday through Friday. It costs \$5 a day for one child and \$3 for the second child and there is no charge for infants under six months. Punchcards are \$40 for 10 visits for the first child, and \$20 for each additional child. On any given day, there are 10 to 20 children at the center, said Daffner, who serves as its director.

"We're really excited about how we have things looking," said Daffner.

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