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Stay 'n Play offers big smiles in the South Hills

by Adam Reinherz, Staff Writer

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Mackayla Landau (left) and Madelyn Daffner enjoy their recent visit to Stay 'n Play. Photo by Randi Daffner

Who said that only little kids get to celebrate turning 1 year old? Stay 'n Play, an indoor play space located inside Beth El Congregation of the South Hills, recently celebrated its first year. The two-room area provides a warm environment where parents and caregivers can bring their children to play, said Bonnie Gordon, the program's founder.

Whether searching for a place to meet up with friends and kids, or somewhere to go on a cold wintery day, Stay 'n Play offers a perfect environment, Gordon added.

The indoor play space offers two rooms with each catering to children's developmental needs.

There is a fine motor skills room, where children can play with toys, including trains, dollhouses and animal farms, and dress-up clothes, puzzles and books. There is also a gross motor room, where children are able to run, jump and interact with other children, parents or caregivers.

"It is our hope that we have created a space that is safe, fun, supportive and a haven where both children and adults receive something in return," wrote Gordon in an email to The Chronicle.

Stay 'n Play is open Mondays through Fridays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. The cost is \$5 per child for unlimited hours of play per day. "Crafts are always included. Everything is always included; if you come during an event, the event is thrown in," said Gordon.

Each month, Stay 'n Play hosts a party dedicated to an upcoming holiday or theme. February featured a Valentine's Day party.

"The events are not particularly related to the Jewish religion — Stay 'n Play is open to the public," said Gordon. "We've made sure that you don't have to be Jewish to identify with this message."

"The thing is, we are open to everybody. We do try to do some Jewish things. [We] had PJ Library come, and they read some Jewish stories," said Randi Daffner, who handles day-to-day scheduling and programs. "We want everyone to feel comfortable."

Stay 'n Play is located inside the former space of Beth El Nursery School, a once prominent South Hills nursery school. After four decades of operation, BENS closed in December 2013 due to declining enrollment.

Yet, from the seeds of BENS' demise emerged Stay 'n Play.

"I had the original idea when the Beth El Nursery School closed," said Gordon. "The rooms were beautiful and completely stocked with kids' toys and arts and crafts and developmental tools."



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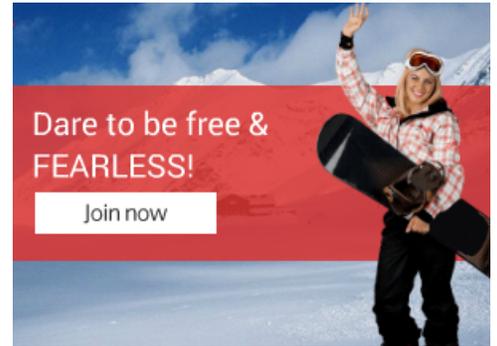
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Around November 2014, Gordon reached out to Karen Frank and Daffner, both members of Beth El, and developed Stay 'n Play. The group created the program, set up the different rooms and selected appropriate toys from the former nursery school.

“We had to go through and pick everything we wanted from what was from the nursery school,” said Daffner. “The good thing was we didn’t have to buy much because everything was pretty much there. A lot went into it. Now we’re keeping it up, keeping it fresh, changing around what toys are out and keeping it exciting.”

Aiding Stay 'n Play in its efforts is the Mushroom Family Learning Center, a self-described “independent, secular nonprofit preschool.”

Like Stay 'n Play, MFLC is also located inside Beth El.

“The Mushroom school has been a feeder for us, which has been nice,” said Daffner. “They can be a feeder for us, and we can be a feeder for them.”

MFLC is in the first year of its lease with Beth El, said Steve Hecht, Beth El’s executive director, who hopes that the lease continues for “several years.”

“[I] can’t make a statement on what the future will hold, [but] it’s been a wonderful relationship thus far,” he said.

With both Stay 'n Play and MFLC occupying the former BENS site, smiles abound, said Daffner.

On average, approximately 20 children visit Stay 'n Play each day. Days with parties attract more kids. Nearly 60 children attended a winter party with Disney character Queen Elsa.

“As a program offered by the synagogue, there’s always the opportunity for people to join,” said Hecht.

Although Hecht indicated that new members have joined as a result of Stay 'n Play, he declined to answer how many members the synagogue has attracted because of the program.

“If we can get some members from it, that would be awesome,” said Daffner.

For those eventually looking for a synagogue, or those searching for a spot to meet up, Stay 'n Play seeks to provide that space.

“There is Mommy and Me, bread baking, playgroups and playdates that occur on site, and we do birthday parties,” said Daffner. “It’s pretty busy. I’m glad we have stuff going on.”

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