A Space to Play

Three-year-old Solomon Umbras, Connor Road, finished rolling out his dough as other little hands poked the sticky globs in a colorful roomful of kids, parents, grandparents and a ton of toys.

Solomon, and the rest of the nearly dozen kids at Stay ‘n Play, in the former Beth El Congregation nursery school, baked loaves of bread, one of many activities the staff and volunteers coordinate at the new drop-in play space for caregivers and kids ages 6 and younger.

As Umbras finished his dough, he went straight to the sensory table to play with the sand, trucks and shovels. Solomon said making the bread was fun, but added that he may have gotten a little sand in his dough. Sandy or not, Solomon is not about to give his loaf away.

The space, at 1900 Cochran Road, used to house the synagogue’s nursery school, which closed in 2012, leaving empty, unused rooms, save for piles of toys. Last September, a group of mothers decided to reinvigorate the play space.

Bonnie Gordon, Royce Avenue, was one of the mothers at the forefront of the project. She and a small group of volunteers spent about a month cleaning and organizing the dolls, trucks, shopping carts and other vari-

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ous toys in one of the rooms. “I always thought [the space] was so nice,” Gordon says. “To me it was a no-brainer.”

Randi Daffner, a Green Tree resident and head of operations at Stay ‘n Play, is always looking for new activities to fill the center’s calendar. Some other activities include story times and Q&A sessions with a pediatrician, when parents can ask medical questions while the children play. Around Valentine’s Day, the staff organized an “I Love Music Valentine’s Day” celebration, with songs and crafts.

Stay ‘n Play staff use the tagline “Grow Together” because it’s a space where children and parents come to learn and interact. An adult must attend with the child, but he or she gets to spend quality time with the little one and learn from other caregivers.

“I think it’s really important for caregivers to have a support network available to them and a space where a child can play freely and safely,” Gordon says. “We have a wonderful space where they can do that.”

Gordon, a mother of two, knows from experience that having other caregivers to talk to is reassuring. “The first kid can be so overwhelming and stressful,” she says. “You have no idea if what you’re doing is right.”

Daffner, a mother of two with a third child on the way, is happy to see people using the building once more, noting it is not affiliated with the synagogue. “We’re not religious, we just want to have young people in the building again,” she says. “It’s like being in a little family.”

Abigail Graham with baby sister Leah and mother, Olivia, at Stay ‘n Play, which is open weekday mornings from 9 to 1.

Stay ‘n Play is open Monday through Friday, 9 A.M. to 1 P.M. Admission is $5 a day per child and $3 for additional children. Children younger than six months are free. Stay ‘n Play also offers $40 punch cards, good for 10 visits, with $20 for additional children.

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