Play With Purpose
at the Hillsboro Public Library

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Photo by Jennifer Ferguson.

THERESA MISENTI has a background in design. She currently runs the Collaboratory makerspaces at both Hillsboro Public Library branches in Washington County. Theresa enjoys paper crafting, fiber arts, and looks forward to dipping her toe into circuitry. Her job is never boring: her favorite days involve taking the 3D printer apart to troubleshoot an issue. The best part of her job is helping people use equipment they would not have access to if the library didn't provide it.

The Hillsboro Public Library (HPL) has two very active branches that serve the robust youth population of Hillsboro. Our Vision Statement is "Welcoming and inclusive, the Hillsboro Public Library is a world-class system where our entire community gathers, connects, and explores." Our mission is simply: "For Everyone/Para Todos." We were ready to live up to our vision of a world-class system for our community.

In the spring of 2018, I worked as a practicum student at the HPL-Brookwood main branch as a requirement for my library science degree. I was issued the challenge to create a more playful, engaging experience in the library for the children we serve in the community. *The Power of Play* states "As libraries continue to compete with television, technology, and commercial endeavors, staying focused on a library's purpose to develop human potential is our best response. Transforming underutilized public spaces into dynamic early learning places is a great starting point" (Stoltz, Conner & Bradberry, 2015). While we deliver stellar programming that is well-attended, the children's collection area was ready for an update.

Research

There is no shortage of research on the importance of play in human development. In my own experience, I've seen my children with fewer and fewer opportunities for unstructured play due to after-school commitments. Unfortunately, recess in school is often used as a bartering chip to be exchanged for good behavior in the classroom, and is not always provided.

Every Child Ready to Read is a campaign to teach parents and caregivers how to increase opportunities for literacy readiness. This initiative presents five actions for caregivers to develop early literacy skills in their children. These actions are talking, reading, writing, singing, and playing. "Play is one of the best ways for children to learn language and literacy skills. They learn about language through playing as the activities help them put thoughts into words and talk about what they are doing" (Talking Points). Integrating play into the library would provide more opportunities for these early literacy experiences for children and their caregivers.

Photo by Kim Dreher

The light table adds a new dimension to building with Magna-Tiles.

I looked to early education models for inspiration. I researched the "Montessori Method" in which children are offered an environment of choice. For example, a Montessori classroom might have various stations, each rich with natural materials that are appropriately sized for the students. A child can decide on which work she is interested in and can use the provided materials to explore the subject at her own pace, in her own way. Maria Montessori was an Italian physician, educator, and innovator, and her methods have been practiced in early education classrooms since she began teaching in the early 1900s. Montessori called play the work of a child.

I also investigated the Reggio Emilia approach. This method sees children as "individuals who are curious about their world and have the powerful potential to learn from all that surrounds them" (Stoudt). Edwards notes, "Educators in Reggio Emilia speak of space as a 'container' that favors social interaction, exploration and learning, but they also see space as having educational 'content,' that is, as containing educational messages and being charged with stimuli toward interactive experience and constructive learning" (p. 70).

I appreciated the Montessori Method and Reggio Emilia approaches for their child-directed learning philosophies. Both systems acknowledge the importance of learning through the senses, utilizing natural materials that are sized for the user, and providing various opportunities for self-expression. Both models value a child's experience over the output of material. I integrated these ideas when planning the space for our library audience.

Considering the way in which children play can help inform how we support each type of play within the library. Sociologist and researcher Mildred Parten of the University of Minnesota's Institute of Child Development categorized six types of play, and five more that fall under "cooperative play." Amanda Rock lists them in her article "11 Types of Play Important to Your Child's Development: Why Having fun Isn't Just a Game for Your Preschooler":

Unoccupied Play:	Setting the stage for future exploration
Solitary Play:	Promotes future self-sufficiency; ages 2–3
Onlooker Play:	Observing other children play
Parallel Play:	Important bridge to later stages of play
Associative Play:	Socialization, cooperation, language development, and problem-solving
Cooperative Play:	Children begin to play together

Within cooperative play, we see:

Dramatic/Fantasy Play:	Role-play helps kids see their place within the community
Competitive Play:	Rules and taking turns, winning and losing
Physical Play:	Gross and fine motor skills
Constructive Play:	Manipulation, building, fitting things together
Symbolic Play:	Exploring ideas, emotions, expression

Practical considerations were as important as philosophical ones. In my previous career as a graphic designer, I had learned about universal design. Ronald Mace and a team of architects, designers, and engineers developed the seven principles of universal design which consider users of all ages, abilities, and sizes, and makes sure the space can be used by everyone (The 7 Principles). Universal design principles were a guiding force for the implementation of elements of play in the library. I wanted to create a library space in which my own children (and others with varying needs) would be successful. Designing spaces that consider different needs and abilities helps to create a more inclusive atmosphere and embodies the library's mission of "For Everyone."

Gross motor skills get a work out when children move and stack the log pillows in the sensory forest.

Photo by Kim Dreher

Universal design Principles from *The Centre for Excellence in Universal Design*:

1. Equitable Use (e.g., a wheelchair ramp that anyone can use)
2. Flexibility in Use (e.g., library checkout stations offered at different heights)
3. Simple and Intuitive Use (e.g., picture books organized by color-coded subject stickers)
4. Perceptible Information (e.g., closed-captioning on a publicly viewed screen)
5. Tolerance for Error (e.g., car keys only work when inserted a certain way)
6. Low Physical Effort (e.g., automatic doors)
7. Size and Space for Approach and Use (e.g., work area designed for people who are left- or right-handed)

I was also inspired by *Library Journal's* article "How to Design Library Space with Kids in Mind." Lesneski suggests: "Offer a variety of areas—active and quiet, social and private—that encourage a range of experiences with multiple levels of challenge for different ages and abilities." My goal was to use universal design principles as the foundation for the children's area, making sure each new toy or piece of furniture considered those guidelines. Instead of creating zones based on ages (baby, toddler, preschooler, elementary), I wanted to develop those four spaces for children: active, quiet, social, and private. This would allow users to have access to the whole of the area, rather than limiting sections based on age and perceived ability.

Observations

With research in hand, the next step was to observe how the space was being used. I routinely visited the area to get a sense of what worked and where we could improve. There seemed to be more shelving than was necessary, and it made it difficult to see the entire children's area. The popular marketplace play structure was in the back corner. This area was crowded with kids and caregivers while the rest of the area was sparsely populated. The children's area has a lovely Storytime Room that for years has been too small to accommodate the throngs of families that attend library programming. We had worked around this problem long ago by moving storytimes and other programs into larger meeting rooms around
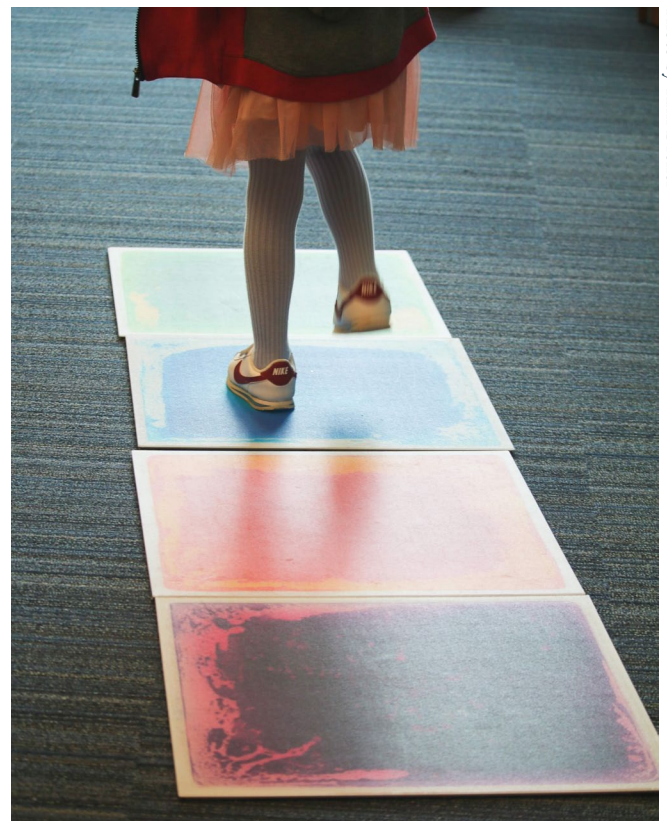

Photo by Kim Dreher

These squishy gel tiles are visually engaging especially when touching and jumping!

the library. We would then use the Storytime Room for large building blocks or puzzles, but the provided offerings were not consistent, which caused frustration and confusion when the room was empty. We had large wooden tables that sometimes had passive programming such as coloring pages, but these were also inconsistently offered. In assessing the current space, it was clear that we had a very active social area for play, but were lacking quiet and private spaces for children who wanted and needed a more sensory-friendly space.

To elicit community input, we held a design thinking workshop. We invited patrons that used the space with their children as well as library staff and members of the city's innovation team. During the workshop, I presented research on play, the importance of play for children's development, the different types of play, philosophies on child-directed learning, and introduced the concept of universal design. We invited our guests to break up into small groups and brainstorm ideas about the perfect library experience. Each group had an opportunity to present their ideas and prototypes. Most designs included a variety of seating options for both adults and children. Some ideas included offering access to adult materials in the children's section. One idea was to add an aquarium wall!

Several participants pointed out how cluttered the space felt. Shelving needed to come down to provide better sight lines and more open areas. The large staff area needed to be replaced with comfortable adult-sized seating and adult workspaces that would be close to the children's play areas.

I also asked library staff to report on what they believed was working and where improvements could be made. Several staffers noted the inadequacy of the current seating arrangement in the space. The scant offerings amounted to eight child-sized wooden chairs which were popular with no one and no seating at all for adults. With nowhere to sit near their children, the adults would either stand, perch on a low and narrow windowsill, or sit on the floor.

I witnessed many kids waiting to play at the marketplace but there were not enough activities for everyone to participate (only one register, and it was often monopolized causing a lot of upset for those wanting a turn). The board book display was too tall for the audience; toddlers were climbing up the structure in order to browse board books.

Photo by Kim Dreher

It's easy to make friends when you are astride one of our elephant chairs!

I also observed things that were working well. While the marketplace was busy, it was a popular space for imaginative play. Kids were happy to color at the big tables when we put out coloring pages and crayons. Our weekly scavenger hunts were a highlight for patrons.

I proposed a few things that should be addressed. We needed more interactive design features. The Storytime Room was too small for its intended purpose and should be redefined and used differently. We needed to create enough comfortable seating for families and more space for free play. The back corner by the marketplace was too congested; the children's area should lead kids into playing in a variety of different zones. Caregivers didn't have access to any adult materials near where the children were playing. And finally, we needed to communicate to caregivers that there was no expectation of silence in the children's area.

With the help of our collection manager, we analyzed the children's collections to determine where circulation indicated a need to weed materials and which collections needed room to grow. It became clear that we did not need to reduce the collection size. We were able to achieve our space goals with regularly scheduled weeding. This allowed us to remove five banks of shelving in the children's room and two from the elementary space. We created more space for the Early Reader and Elementary Graphic Novel collections.

Defining Spaces by Ability

Prior to my practicum, the library hired an architectural firm to consult on the best way to improve the space. They suggested creating different age-specific areas of play for babies, toddlers, and preschoolers. I incorporated these ideas into my proposal by focusing instead on types of space that Lesneski defined: Active, Quiet, Social, and Private, while also considering other developmental needs (fine and gross motor skills, social skills, and pretend play).

Active Space

Active Space allows for jumping, swinging, and climbing; all of these are important for gross motor development in children. These are also activities that are generally not experienced in your typical library setting. Our "pie in the sky" idea was to include a play treehouse that had some climbing and swinging opportunities, but our budget wouldn't allow for that in this first iteration. We added a large tumbling mat with a gentle slope, which has proven very popular. We also added a few wall-mounted, interactive sensory boards for play and a mirror with railing to practice pulling up to standing. Children can be onlookers or play in parallel with others here.
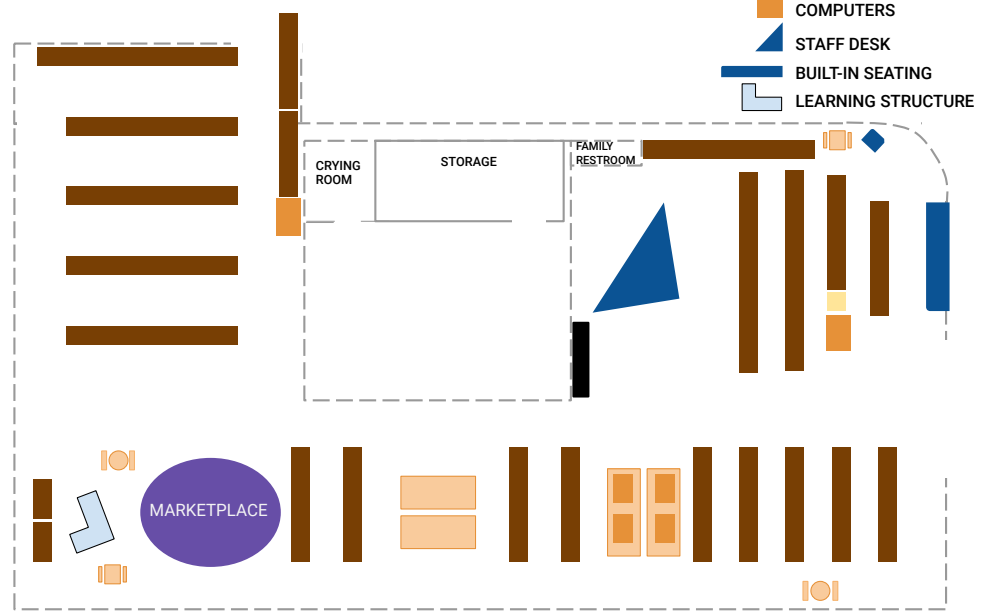
Quiet Space

Quiet Zones are important for decompressing and calming down, especially after a particularly exciting storytime or library event. We changed the Storytime Room into a sensory forest, designing around the large tree sculpture, and adding soft log-shaped pillows, engaging elephant chairs, and dimmed overhead lighting. The soft glow of the light table completes this space and allows opportunities for quiet, solitary play.
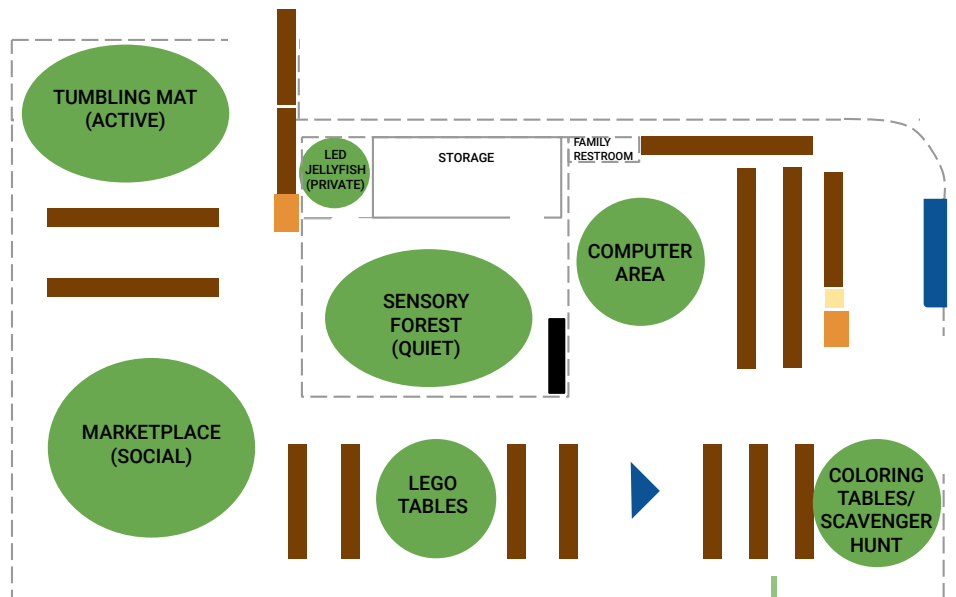
Social Space

Social spaces allow for the development of social/emotional skills, improve speech and language development through role-playing, and give children opportunities for associa-

Children's Area Floor Plan–Before

COMPUTERS
STAFF DESK
BUILT-IN SEATING
LEARNING STRUCTURE

CRYING ROOM

STORAGE

FAMILY RESTROOM

MARKETPLACE

Children's Area Floor Plan–After

COMPUTERS
STAFF DESK

TUMBLING MAT (ACTIVE)

LED JELLYFISH (PRIVATE)

STORAGE

FAMILY RESTROOM

COMPUTER AREA

SENSORY FOREST (QUIET)

MARKETPLACE (SOCIAL)

LEGO TABLES

COLORING TABLES/ SCAVENGER HUNT

tive and cooperative play. The marketplace already served as this social hot spot. We added a Lego table and coloring table (both great for fine motor skill development) in two different areas. Now there are more social spaces to choose from and one spot does not get overwhelmed.

Private Space

Finally, a private space is another necessary space for our children. In our public libraries, it's important that no one gets lost or is in an unsafe situation. We introduced a small tent into the space that ended up being so popular, it broke! When we have an opportunity to expand our play area, we would like to see a couple of soft tunnels and perhaps a sturdier tent for our young patrons.

Currently, within our sensory forest, there is a small, doorless room. It is dimmer than the sensory forest, and is lit with the help of a wall-mounted LED jellyfish. It is a very calming space, and great for people who need time to decompress and self-regulate.

Photo by Kim Dreher

Brick building develops fine motor skills.

Training Staff/Library Expectations

Educating parents on library expectations is important. There are many parents and caregivers who were brought up in the silent library and think those same expectations apply today. We need to continuously reinforce the new ways so people become more comfortable in the library, particularly in the children's section. Having library staff model play and behavior helps lead parents into the new age of library use. One interaction can simply be observing a child playing Legos and saying, "Did you know your child is developing fine motor skills while she tries to connect those Lego bricks?"

I had a great interaction with a patron recently. I noticed she was shushing her children while they played with the large legos in the Sensory Forest. They were not particularly loud, just making joyful, playful noises that were totally appropriate for their activity. I went up to her and explained that we welcome this type of noise in the children's area, and that, in fact, we are planning to encourage more opportunities for play. She was visibly relieved,

and told me that she has been shushed by a librarian in the past. I told her that we have all been trained with these new expectations. I shared that we are fortunate to have the leadership of an innovative director, and we want to serve all of the community, especially the children, in the ways they are best served. And for children, I believe that is play.

Expected and Unexpected Challenges

We implemented the changes late last year. Our goal of incorporating play throughout the space has been met. It is a louder, busier, and more engaging space with more distributed play throughout the area.

The tumbling mat in the active space has been met with some confusion for patrons. Typically, shoes should be off when using those kinds of mats, but in the library, shoes must stay on. We ended up creating a sign reminding patrons to keep shoes on their little ones' feet, even on the mat. Since signage can often be ignored, library staff has had to remind patrons to keep shoes on in the library.

The Sensory Forest is perhaps the most popular space, with kids enjoying playing Magna-Tiles on the light table, stacking log-shaped pillows, and creating delightful scenes with the elephant-shaped seats. While this quiet space was designed to be a soothing environment with its dimmed lights and soft seating, it can get pretty rowdy with all the pillow and elephant rearranging! We have experimented with closing the sliding doors halfway to further enclose the space and it seems to help sometimes. Having a staff member pop in and hang out can also help stabilize the energy.

Library staff has had to become a little more flexible and adjust their own expectations of the volume (and tidiness) of the space. Sometimes Lego bricks can be found on the floor and fresh crayons are peeled and left on the coloring table. It is a little extra work for library staff to tidy up multiple stations throughout the day; it has been helpful to model expectations for both children and their parents.

We've gotten positive feedback from parents, grandparents, and children themselves about the redesign. Post-storytime hangouts are more popular than ever, thanks to a variety of play spaces and seating options. It has become a playdate destination for friends and caregivers to connect with each other. It is rewarding to see the children interacting with the library in new ways.

I look forward to the next iteration of the children's area, as this process of evaluation and improvement will continue. I would love to see some sensory swings hanging from the ceiling, and am still holding out for an indoor treehouse!

A Note of Thanks
We are very fortunate to have a prosperous Friends of the Library organization. With their generosity, we were able to implement most of our initial ideas.

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