

 Friday, September 6, 2013

New toy lending library also a gathering place for young families

Posted: 12:00 a.m. Friday, Sept. 6, 2013 BY [NICOLE VILLALPANDO](#) - AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

As a teacher, Liza Wilson would use the Family Connections toy lending library for her classroom. When the nonprofit agency closed, Wilson saw a void open up in the community.

In July, Wilson opened Toybrary Austin, a colorful space off Anderson Lane that is filled with toys families can check out for a membership fee. She's heard from a number of people that they're "so glad someone filled the hole," Wilson says.

Toybrary Austin has 60 members, a third more than Wilson thought she'd have the first two months, and new families are stopping by every day to find out more about the store. Most of the members live nearby, but she's also had people from Cedar Park and Hutto sign up for memberships.

Using a toy lending library allows families to try out toys before they decide to buy them or before kids get bored with them. They also can try out a lot of different kinds of toys to see what their children are interested in.

Families also save space, especially with larger toys, because the toys are temporary and don't require permanent storage.

The store's colorful shelves are arranged by type of toy. Each section has a sign done in classic refrigerator magnet letters to indicate what kind of toy is on the shelf. That was the idea of designer Clarissa Hulsey Bailey of Écru Moderne.

Wilson tries hard to stock toys that are about learning, especially hands-on, educational toys without sound and flashing lights. That doesn't mean they are all quiet. The musical instruments, especially the guitars, have been popular. Vintage toys that parents might have played with such as the Playskool plane also have been popular.

Most of the toys are for ages six months to five years, though she does have some toys for older kids.

She chooses toys that are gender neutral, though she does have block sets that have more "girl" colors and some that have more "boy" colors. She's not big on princesses or girly-girl toys, so you won't find that here. She's also not big on action figures.

“I don’t mind that a lot of people do the princess thing, I just don’t see it as promoting character development or intelligence in girls, whereas other toys do,” she says. She loves an engineering set called Goldie Blox that appeals to girls because it comes with a story.

You can check out up to three toys per child at a time (or five if you are a teacher) and each toy for up to a month, then there’s a \$1-a-day fine. There’s also a charge of 25 cents to \$1 for missing pieces. All the toys are sanitized with a mix of lavender essential oil and water before they go back into rotation.

Toybrary Austin has three levels of membership: The Baby Bear, \$45 a month for three months; the Papa Bear, \$35 a month for six months; and the Mama Bear, \$25 a month for 12 months. The Brother Bear lets you add a sibling to any package for \$10 a month.

If you’re not a member, you also can come and play at the store for \$3 a day. Toybrary Austin has a large play area with some toys that you can check out and some that stay there. There are riding toys, a kitchen and a workbench as well as a stage with costumes. Wilson has organic snacks and drinks for kids and parents for sale.

Some toys also are for sale. Often they are those that wouldn’t lend well, including puzzles and Teachable Totes — zippered bags that have a lesson in math, science or reading inside.

Aside from the toys, Toybrary Austin offers a calendar full of meet-up events, story times, children’s classes in Spanish and art and parenting classes by Cheer Up Buttercups and other experts. Some classes and events are free, some cost extra. A classroom off the main play area is ideal for some of the more structured classes.

“People that love it really love it,” she says about her new venture.

Toybrary Austin

When: 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday

Where: 7817 Rockwood Lane, Suite 101

Membership fees: \$25-\$45 a month, one child, \$10 additional sibling; \$3 a child to stay and play

Information: 512-765-4174, www.toybraryaustin.com

Upcoming events: 10 a.m. Tuesday: baby signing class demonstration, free; 10 a.m. Thursday: workshop with Peggy Kruger Tietz, author of “Yell and

Shout, Cry and Pout, a Kid's Guide to Feelings," free; 5 p.m. Thursday: happy hour for moms with free cupcakes and champagne, jewelry and children's clothing for sale and door prizes, free; 12:30-1 p.m. Sept. 14: children's music performer Laura Freeman performs for a benefit for Magnolia Montessori; 10 a.m. Sept. 19: "Taming your Toddler's Tantrums, Breakdowns and Fits," from Cheer Up Buttercups, \$15; 10:30 a.m. Sept. 20: Singalong with Staci Gray, \$3 a child; 10 a.m. Sept. 25: "Eat, Sleep, Play: Building a Foundation for Happy, Healthy, Well-Rested Children" parenting workshop, \$10; 11 a.m. Sept. 27: Teddy bear picnic and story time, free; 10 a.m.-1 p.m. Sept. 29: kid carnival and diaper donation benefiting the Austin Diaper Bank.



Toybrary Austin is a new toy lending space ideal for children ages infant to 5 but

with some toys for older children.



Liza Wilson owns the store.



Toys also can be played with at the store. If you don't have a membership, you can pay \$3 a child to stay and play.



Makeup bags keep toy sets organized.