

# Village of fun waiting at Playplace

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Children can play house, play firefighter or set up a grocery store, and they don't mess up their own home doing it.

Joan Dubnicka opened a children's play center based on that premise and the knowledge that parents and children like to get out of the house.

"You are looking for someplace to go. And you need a very child-friendly place, otherwise it is high stress," said Dubnicka, who was a stay-at-home mom with three daughters for many years.

She wanted to fill "a different niche" than what's offered at preschools, libraries and park districts.

"There are so many good things for kids, but they are scheduled for certain times," said Dubnicka, who lives in Arlington Heights. She wanted her business "to be a drop-in place. If your child is up from his nap and it's a good day, you come."

Her Little Village Playplace in Arlington Heights offers a variety of play settings for children ages 1 to 7. Located in a storefront at 176 N. Arlington Heights Road, the playplace has rooms set up as a small-scale veterinarian's office, workshop, theater, grocery, fire station, and kitchen. There's also a bank with a real, though non-working, cash machine.

"I tell the kids it's a reverse ATM," said Dubnicka. "You can put money in, but you can't take it out."

## Place to relax

Little Village, which opened in April, offers hands-on activities like those available at children's museums, but it's much smaller so parents don't have to stay with their children while they explore and play, Dubnicka said. She sells snacks and beverages, so the adults can relax and socialize while their children amuse themselves.

Some parents may bring a single child, hoping other children will be on hand to play with their child. Other parents arrange to meet their friends with children there.

That was the case with Beth Culhane of Arlington Heights and Lori Brunk from Palatine. The two friends both have 4-year-old daughters who made snowflake ornaments out of popsicle sticks while their mothers chatted in the craft room at Little Village.

Each day, Dubnicka writes a suggestion for a project, such as a letter to Santa or a paper chain, on the whiteboard in the craft room and puts out the necessary materials.

Culhane liked that they wouldn't have to clean up when their girls were finished, although Brunk said they were trying to tidy up as their girls left each area. But, unlike when they invite children over for a play date, "you don't have to clean up before they come," said Brunk.

What the women said they "really like," is the chance to talk relatively uninterrupted.

"There is enough to occupy (the kids)," said Brunk.

"And they can't get into something they are not supposed to," Culhane said.

"And they are not always asking for food," Brunk said.

When the weather turns cold outside, there are few places to go where young children will have fun other than the mall, they said.

In addition to parents, Dubnicka said many nannies and baby-sitters brought children to Little Village, especially during July and August. She guesses they wanted an air-conditioned place when it was too hot to go to the parks.

Grandparents with their grandchildren in tow are regulars, too. "Maybe they live in a smaller house or a condominium and there isn't a lot of room to play," said Dubnicka.

Pete Doulas watched his 3-year-old grandson Michael and his 19-month-old granddaughter Elizabeth at the playplace last week. It was the third visit for Doulas who lives in Chicago and comes to Arlington Heights to visit his son's family.

"I can watch my grandkids, so my daughter-in-law can do some chores or run errands or clean house," Doulas said. "They have plenty of toys at home, but getting out of the house is good for them, especially in the winter. It's a change of scenery."

He watched Michael fill the cash register drawer with plastic strawberries in the grocery store, and then try to get in the apple and orange. Next, his grandson slid down the slide, instead of a pole, in the fire station and donned a yellow firefighter's jacket, rubber boots and a plastic helmet.

## **Funny places**

About 400 children played at Little Village in November, Dubnicka estimated.

At the end of every day, Dubnicka goes from room to room, picking up stuffed animals, letters to Santa, plastic tools and packages, and returns them to their appropriate area. At closing time on a recent Wednesday, the supermarket shelves in the grocery store were bare.

"The grocery store has been shopped out," said Dubnicka. It's typical for all the items in the grocery store to get moved to the little house each day, she said. "They buy it all and they will have it all stuffed in the house."

"You find things in funny places," Dubnicka said. "One time I found the pizza in the mailbox. I thought, 'That's real pizza delivery.'"

Little Village Playplace is open 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday. The cost is \$7.50 per child for an unlimited period of playtime. Adults come in free. A package of 10 visits can be purchased for \$60. Private parties may be booked on Sundays.