

A Supportive Solution for Caregivers

Computer Work and Play Stations

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In January 2022, an innovative work station became an undisputed sensation on social media. The Computer Work and Play Stations at the Fairfield Area Library, part of the Henrico County (VA) Public Library (HCPL), struck a chord with parents of young children who have struggled to balance work and childcare during the pandemic.

The stations went viral after Ali Faruk, policy director for Families Forward Virginia, tweeted a photo of the workstations saying he had never seen anything like them before. Media attention was swift and widespread, covered by national and international print and broadcast outlets.

To be sure, the stations are not stand-ins for childcare, but are designed to help caregivers of small children use the computer efficiently at the library.

Our belief is that parents and caregivers should not have to arrange childcare to visit their library. Libraries are for everyone, and that includes adults who care for small children; that means meeting both the adult and child's different and ever-changing information and learning needs. These supportive furniture pieces help people who already frequent the library

have a better experience, which can help facilitate learning, working, and using the library.

HCPL serves a diverse and growing suburban county that surrounds the city of Richmond on three sides. The Computer Work and Play Stations at the Fairfield Area Library, which opened in 2019 in the historically Black Fairfield District of Henrico, were designed years before the pandemic radically altered the landscape of work and childcare. They were conceptualized by Library Director Barbara Weedman in response to a problem she had seen throughout her career as a librarian—how to help parents of small children get work done with their little ones in tow.

Librarians everywhere have seen this—parents or caregivers placing a car seat on the floor behind or next to their seat, turning away from their work every thirty seconds to make sure all is well; parking their stroller behind them and obstructing foot traffic or trying to get a computer on the end of the row so that the path remains clear; bouncing their little one on their knee and typing with one hand. There is no good solution.

In 2017, as the new library was being planned, Weedman envisioned an adult-sized computer desk located in the children's area with a comfortable play enclosure right next to it, so a caregiver could work while their little one could play.

As part of the design process, architects held community input sessions to determine how patrons used the existing library, looking for ideas for the new facility. Participants were also asked about ways the current, older library fell short in meeting their needs.



Patty Conway is Community Relations Coordinator of Henrico County (VA) Public Library.



We were stunned the day a library desk went viral.
Photo courtesy TMC Furniture by Chris Cunningham Photography.

Participants of all ages expressed their desire that the new library would support young people learning. It was clear that supporting young people and families would need to be integral to the building's design.

This further motivated Weedman to share her concept for an adult-sized computer desk in the children's area of the library with an adjacent, comfortable play enclosure. She discussed the idea at planning meetings, and designer Shannon Wray of Quinn Evans Architects sought a furniture-build solution.

TMC Furniture, a Michigan-based manufacturer of custom and retail wood furniture solutions, worked with Wray and the team to design the stations, which are made from wood with rounded edges and a durable finish, featuring a vinyl cushion at the base of the enclosure and developmentally appropriate interactive panels surrounding, colored with plant based and nontoxic dyes.

The carrels were made to be easily wiped down and sanitized, and to withstand frequent in-depth cleanings. Youth Services Coordinator Rick Samuelson advised on the selection and content of the interactive play panels, which were designed to support early literacy skills and inclusivity, and suggested the addition of low-height inset mirrors to encourage tummy time for infants.

On the library's opening day, a mother with an infant sat down at a station to use the computer and placed her baby in

the carrel, without having received any direction from staff. The design was immediately intuitive.

Despite some pandemic-related service interruptions, stations' design and the popularity of the new, family-friendly building resulted in a slow and steady growth in usage. Demand is managed like other public computers, via a registration system that allows one two-hour session per user. Staff can extend this time if needed and resources are available.

To ensure the stations remain clean, they were designed to be easily wiped down. Even before the pandemic, creating something easy-to-clean was important as it was intended for use by babies and toddlers. Maintenance staff regularly clean the stations each day, wipes are available to patrons, and deep cleaning and sanitizing is performed every night. This is true of all areas of the library.

The design tapped into parents' experiences during the pandemic, struggling to balance childcare and work. And TMC Furniture has fielded inquiries about purchasing the retail version of this custom product from as far away as Japan and the Netherlands.

We have found that these stations are just another way libraries can support our users—they're an innovative piece of infrastructure that helps meet information needs and makes our spaces more accessible and accommodating to caregivers of small children. &