

# Play On!

## Bee Cave Public Library and the Family Place Initiative

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**O**n any given Tuesday morning, Bee Cave Public Library in Texas is bustling with families. When the doors open, the toddler crowd and their grown-ups, usually sixty to eighty people, gather and head upstairs to our community room for storytime.

After a lively half-hour program, those same families stream downstairs and fill our children's space to visit, play with blocks and toys, and read books. After a while, the group thins out when it's time for lunch and naps. As the families leave, they have bags loaded with library books slung over a shoulder or tucked into their stroller. This scene will be repeated twice more each week, year around.

Experiences like this are happening in libraries all across the country. At Bee Cave Public Library, and in more than five hundred libraries in the United States, families are immersed in a Family Place Libraries experience with every library visit.

### About Family Place Libraries

The Family Place Libraries initiative promotes a national model for public libraries to serve families of young children—especially from birth to age three. The practices are designed to establish the library as a starting place for early learning that supports the role of parents as first teachers.

To become a designated Family Place Library, the first step is to attend the National Training Institute at Middle Country Library on Long Island, New York. Attendees take a deep dive into topics that include infant brain development, child development, emergent literacy, parent engagement and education, and space design.



After this in-depth training, the staff returns to their library to plan and implement the philosophies and services. The national network team provides ongoing technical assistance and site support that includes training webinars, one-on-one email/phone consultation, and an onsite visit. After libraries earn their initial certification, there is a simple recertification process each year.

### Bee Cave's Family Place Beginning

Bee Cave Public Library is located in the scenic Texas Hill Country just outside of Austin. Our library sits in a mixed-use development that offers shopping, dining, and entertainment as well as residential and office space. Bee Cave prides itself in being a “small but mighty” library for the creative ways we use our limited space to serve our growing community.



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We attract patrons from many surrounding communities in our rapidly growing part of the state. Families with young children make up a big percentage of our users, and our storytimes and other children's programs have been among our most popular offerings.

We first learned about the Family Place Libraries program in 2015. The Texas State Library was offering its second wave of grants to encourage Texas libraries to adopt the Family Place model of service that had been well established on the East Coast since the 1970s.

After attending the training, our library staff made a presentation to our City Council to introduce them to the Family Place philosophy and share its impact on our services to families with young children. After getting City Council's approval, we implemented the Family Place Libraries model and services and received formal accreditation in 2017.

## How Family Place Looks at Bee Cave

Family Place Libraries provide a number of key elements to patrons. And each library has some flexibility in how the core components come into play. And we do mean *play*, since learn-through-play is central to the Family Place service model. Here's how we apply Family Place principles to several areas at Bee Cave Public Library.

## Specially Designed Space

The children's space in a Family Place Library is meant to be welcoming for families with young children to explore whenever the library is open. We already had a basic foundation of picture books and board books, but finding room to add toys presented a challenge. We made room in two small corners, adding soft

building blocks in one pocket of space and a child-sized writing desk in another.

Block play holds wide appeal for children and provides opportunities to practice motor skills, problem-solving, mathematical skills, imagination, and so much more. The desk became a dramatic play station that rotates every couple of months, using toys and simple materials to imagine a chicken coop, a pizza parlor, a vet's office, a florist, and a barbecue grill (*this is Texas, after all!*) to name a few. We love to watch our young patrons make a beeline—at Bee Cave!—for the corner that has become the most popular area of the library.

## The Parenting Collection

Of course, the most obvious resource a library can provide is books. Some of the books in our parenting collection are adult nonfiction books on topics of interest to parents of young children. Others are picture books that a caregiver might want to share with a child to provide information and spark discussion on a particular topic, such as the death of a pet or growing up with a sibling who has special needs.

Through a \$2,300 grant from the Texas Book Festival, we grew our collection of parenting books when we first implemented the Family Place Libraries model. This collection is shelved conveniently near the play area for easy access by caregivers who may not get to visit other sections of the library with young children in tow.

## Trained Staff

Each of our current four librarians have attended the four-day Family Place Library training institute in Long Island, the last one as recently as spring 2024. We've held our own on-site orientations to share the mission of the program with our circulation team as well. This way, all staff that families come in contact with during their library visits hold these critical concepts in mind.

## The Caregiver-Child Workshops

Our version of the caregiver-child workshop, offered twice a year, is called 1\*2\*3 PlaySmart. It's designed to connect toddlers and their parents or caregivers with community resources and reinforce the importance of "learning through play" for children. We ask participants to commit to attend for an hour once per week over the course of five weeks.

This play time is meant to give families dedicated opportunities for play and bonding. The room is laid out with a number of stations of interactive toys and is particularly helpful for first-time parents to reinforce their role as their child's first teacher. The experience is hands-on and encourages caregivers to follow their child's lead as to where and how they want to play. Children might be drawn to the transportation rug with its cars, trucks,

and trains; the pretend kitchen and dining area; or the soft slide, tunnel, and rocking boat, for example.

While the “hardscape” remains the same throughout the workshop, the exploratory table changes each week to young patrons’ absolute delight. This area of sensory exploration is a clear favorite of many toddlers. You might find little ones sorting pom poms by color or scooping colored rice in bins or rolling out soft modeling dough.

Another weekly change in the workshop is the community resource specialist. Each week, a different early childhood expert in the areas of child development, nutrition, literacy, motor skills, or speech and language attends to answer caregivers’ individual questions in a casual setting.

## Why We Love Being a Family Place Library

We’ve always been a family-friendly library. Joining the Family Place team reinforced what we already believed about the library’s role and gave a structured way to accomplish that.

Now the programs we plan and materials we buy for children’s services are viewed through the lens of Family Place philosophies, streamlining best practices and bringing a sense of cohesiveness.

Our weekly storytimes—two family storytimes and one infant lapsit storytime called Baby Bumblebees!—bring in a lot of families, but Family Place has helped us meet new families who came to be a part of our 1\*2\*3 PlaySmart workshops. Many of these families continue as valued library patrons long after the workshop ends.

New families coming to the library are always happy to see our offerings for young children. They are amazed, impressed, and thankful for the children’s area with its extensive book collection and play area. It’s so rewarding to see an adult and child reading together in one of the comfy seats. And watching the creativity as they enjoy the toys brings smiles to everyone.

We lean into the resources the Family Place Libraries national team provides, such as professional development videos, bibliographies for collection development, partnership and outreach resources, and marketing materials. Family Place has recently partnered with Baker & Taylor to offer Family Place libraries access to ParentTV, a database that offers thousands of on-demand videos and courses to support the parenting and care of children from birth to teens.

We’ve also established strong partnerships with the resource professionals that come to the 1\*2\*3 PlaySmart workshops and have been able to utilize them for other collaborations.

Of course, all libraries dealt with ripples caused by the pandemic and being closed to the public for a time. In a testament to the

power of libraries creating a sense of community through programs, a patron shared a wonderful anecdote with us recently.

One of the moms attending our most recent 1\*2\*3 PlaySmart with her second child shared the story of attending the workshop in 2020 with her first child, right before the pandemic caused the library and the rest of the world to shut down. She described how eight families who met for the first time at Bee Cave’s Family Place workshop formed a “pod” that got them through the whole pandemic together. The families are still in touch to this day, some even becoming best friends. We love this example of us fulfilling one of our missions to be a place of connection and community building.

Speaking of the pandemic, after we reopened in 2021, we noticed that a lot of our program attendees skewed younger than it had before. Our all-ages programs are now often attended mostly by toddlers and their caregivers. Both our Family Place workshops and play area help to meet the needs of having even more very young patrons through our doors.

At the end of the day, what we value most about being a Family Place Library are the experiences we are able to provide for our patrons that they take with them beyond our walls and into their homes. Workshop attendee Danny Browne, parent of twins, shared, “Before this workshop, I thought I was playing with my kids at home, but I really wasn’t. This workshop has shown me that just being near them while they are playing isn’t the same thing as actually playing with them.”

Linnea Hopper has attended the workshop with two of her children and looks forward to bringing her youngest child soon. She said, “One of my favorite things as a parent attending the program was being able to play with my child away from home where I didn’t have the typical distractions to pull me away such as laundry and dishes. I was able to see which interests my littles gravitated towards the most. I feel so blessed to have been able to access a program like this in my own neighborhood. It’s hard to believe that a program of its caliber is offered at no cost! Such is the beauty of local libraries! I will always cherish the enriching time we spent together at 1\*2\*3 PlaySmart.”

## Planning for a New Library

We have our eye on plans for a new library with more space. As we discuss our hopes and dreams, we keep the philosophy of Family Place in mind as we design our children’s spaces and services. One thing is definite—Bee Cave Public Library will always be buzzing with Family Place spaces, programs, and approaches to librarianship. We encourage more libraries to consider joining the Family Place Libraries coalition, too. &

*For more information about Bee Cave Public Library, visit [www.beecavelibrary.com](http://www.beecavelibrary.com) and check out our social media on Instagram, @beecavelibrary. For more information about Family Place Libraries, visit [www.familyplacelibraries.org](http://www.familyplacelibraries.org).*