
Public Libraries as Centers for Play

A Survey and Case Examples

PETER GRAY, AUTUMN ERDAHL SOLOMON,
AND LEAH TATGENHORST

The authors surveyed public libraries to learn about the opportunities for play they offered and children's freedom to engage in such play without adult supervision. The authors conclude that, in recent years, public libraries in the United States have increasingly created spaces and programs enabling free play for children and teens. These include "maker spaces" (for constructive play), playrooms with toys and games for young children, and rooms where teens can socialize and play games. The authors describe the survey results and three especially successful library play programs in detail. These results, they conclude, illustrate how librarians have welcomed children and enabled free play in the library through policies of nonintervention and by emphasizing nonintervention by care givers who might otherwise intervene in such play. **Key words:** free play; maker spaces; play and libraries; public libraries

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES, opportunities for children to play freely with one another, without adult control, have declined greatly (Chudacoff 2007; Frost 2012; Gray 2011, 2013; Digennaro 2021). The daily neighborhood play that many adults of middle age and older enjoyed when they were children does not exist today for most children. A decline in neighborhood cohesiveness, increased fears of potential dangers to unsupervised children, increased academic pressures on children, and legal constraints that prevent or dissuade parents from allowing their children to roam freely have all combined to keep children housebound or under adult surveillance far more extensively than in the past. When children do come together outside of school, they most often do so for sports or other activities controlled and directed by adults.

This decline in free play has been accompanied by well-documented increases in anxiety, depression, and even suicide among school-aged children, all of which have reached record levels in the past two decades (Centers for Disease Control 2016; Plemmons et al. 2018; Twenge et al. 2010). There are

good reasons to believe that play deprivation is a major cause of such increased psychopathology (Gray 2011, 2013; Belknap and Hazler 2014; Digennaro 2021). As illustrated by one recent study, children's own conceptions of happiness are intrinsically connected with their conceptions of play (Moore and Lynch 2018). Take away play, and you take away happiness. Through play children also learn to create their own activities, negotiate with peers, solve their own problems, and generally take charge of their own lives (Frost et al. 2012; Gray 2013). Play deprivation has been described as a form of educational poverty (Digennaro 2021), and it may be the primary form of educational poverty in the United States today.

Studies indicate that the primary stimulus for joyful play by children is other children to play with and that the primary inhibitor is adult monitors who intervene and interfere with children's sense of freedom and self-control (Floyd et al. 2011; Gray 2020). To bring play back to children's lives, we must create places where children can congregate and play freely but which are sufficiently safe to allay societal and parental fears. Generally, this means places with adults who keep an eye out for real dangers but who otherwise refrain from interfering with children's activities. This is the approach of Adventure Playgrounds (Almon and Keeler 2018) and a growing number of before- and after-school free-play opportunities at schools recently promoted by the nonprofit Let Grow organization (Parrott and Cohen 2020, 2021). Our purpose in this article is to examine the possibility that public libraries could become places where children regularly congregate for play.

Public libraries can be thought of as publicly supported educational complements to public schools. Just as we have schools in every community, we have libraries in every community. While schools are centers for teacher-directed education, libraries are centers for self-directed education. Traditionally—and to a considerable degree still today—the primary functions of libraries are to make books and other media available to patrons generally and to help them find whatever information they seek. Unlike teachers, librarians do not tell patrons what to read but, instead, help them find what they want to read.

In recent years, as books and other reading materials have become increasingly available online or easily and cheaply purchased and as information has become easy to find through Internet searches, the perceived value of libraries' traditional functions has declined. Partly as a result, many libraries are expanding their functions to meet other needs of the communities in which they are located. Libraries regularly host speakers, films, book clubs, and other com-

munity events free for anyone who wants to come. And, of most interest here, some are becoming places for children to play.

Our search of published articles about play opportunities in libraries indicates that the most common such opportunities are oriented toward toddlers and preschool-aged children who come with a parent or other care giver. Library play areas most often include toys for young children along with books that care givers can read to their charges. However, an increasing number of libraries have developed play areas to appeal to children of elementary school age. For example, Brenna Hassinger-Das and colleagues (2020) describe an observational study of new play spaces in three branch libraries in Philadelphia where children playing typically range from one to ten years in age. The spaces include such features as climbing walls, stages, and toys chosen to appeal to elementary school children as well as younger ones. Although many libraries present their play areas as places for children and care givers to play and interact together, at least some encourage care givers to hold back and allow their children to play freely, with minimal intervention (Swadley 2021).

Another type of play that has increased rapidly in libraries during the past decade comes from the introduction of “maker spaces.” Making things for fun—referred to by play scholars as constructive play—constitutes a common form of play for people of all ages throughout the world. It is free play to the degree that those engaged choose what and how to create and are concerned more with the creative process than with the finished product. Modern maker spaces are generally understood to be places that have tools—including high-tech tools such as 3-D printers—for creating a wide variety of things, places where people (makers) congregate to share ideas and help one another in their creative activities. Tinkering—experimenting playfully with various techniques—is regarded as a central aspect of maker culture (Willett 2018). Reportedly, the first modern maker space in a U.S. public library was opened at the Fayetteville Free Library in Fayetteville, New York, in 2011 (Wang et al. 2016). In the decade since, maker spaces have opened in hundreds of libraries across the country.

Some libraries have gone to great effort to provide remarkable facilities for creative activities by young people. The Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library in Memphis, Tennessee, recently featured in *Smithsonian Magazine*, has a facility designed specifically for teens that includes not just a fully equipped maker space but also a state-of-the-art recording studio, a video lab, a robotics lab, an art studio, and a teen-hangout area (Grant 2021). It has brought hundreds of young people into the library who would normally not be

library patrons, some of whom have gone on to win awards for their creations.

Research about how librarians view and present their maker spaces and how patrons use them reveals some tension between a tendency to see them as places in which STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) skills are taught in school-like, didactic settings and as places in which library staff members maintain a more hands-off approach and allow patrons to experiment, discover, and learn from one another (Lui 2016; Willett 2018). Observations of schoolchildren using a library maker space as part of a field trip from school indicate that such questions as “What do you plan to make?”—which direct attention to a product and hint at possible evaluation—tend to inhibit development of a playful attitude (Skaland et al. 2020). The playful, maker attitude seems to require a period of just “messing around” with the equipment to discover its properties and then sharing these discoveries (along with ideas about what it might be fun to make) with other participants.

To learn more about public libraries as places for young people to play, we surveyed library program managers at U.S. public libraries of diverse sizes and locations. We were interested in the opportunities libraries offered for play, including constructive play, and in the degree to which children of various ages were welcome to use these facilities without the presence of a parent or care giver. In what follows, we describe the survey methods and findings and then describe three examples of libraries that, in quite different ways, have provided especially successful play opportunities.

Survey Methods

Research Design and Modification

Our original plan for gathering data was to survey one hundred public libraries, all listed by the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences, selected to include roughly equal numbers of libraries from large cities, suburbs, and small towns, roughly evenly distributed across the United States. However, we had to abandon this plan, because shortly after we initiated contact with the selected libraries in early March of 2020, they began to shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Of the one hundred selected libraries, just twenty-five returned completed surveys. To supplement these responses, we adopted a new recruitment approach. On March 30, 2020, we posted a notice on the online message boards of the American Library Association (ALA) and the Public Library Association

(PLA, a division of the ALA) inviting program librarians at public libraries to participate in “a survey on ways that public libraries are offering opportunities for creative, self-directed activities available to children and teens.” The notice included a link to the online survey form. This new approach resulted in an additional twenty-seven completed surveys by April 14, 2020, at which date we ended the recruitment phase.

The COVID-induced change to data collection has altered the way our data may be interpreted. Instead of our selection of a collection of diverse libraries, our sample became largely self-selected, comprised of the twenty-five libraries that chose to respond quickly to our initial request and the twenty-seven that found and responded to the ALA and PLA message board requests. This self-selection process makes it likely that our sample is biased toward libraries offering the kinds of programs focused on in this study. Therefore, this report should not be used to estimate the percentage of all public libraries in the United States that have such programs. Instead, it should be used to learn how libraries that have enabled play have done so.

Survey Questionnaire

The questionnaire was presented online using Google Forms. It included the following sets of questions.

MINIMUM AGE QUESTIONS

- Has your library established a minimum age for entering and using the library without a parent or other adult guardian? If so, what is that age?
- Does your library have a minimum age for specific library opportunities, such as reserving a room or using a maker space or other specific library equipment without an adult? If so, please list the age requirements for each such opportunity.
- Has the presence of children or teens in your library caused any problems for your library or led to complaints by adult patrons? If so, please explain and describe how you have dealt with such problems of complaints.

MAKER SPACE QUESTIONS

- Does your library include a maker space (broadly defined as an area

where patrons can create things)? If “Yes”:

- What are the main items of equipment available in this space? Which item or items have proven to be the most used and valued by children and teens?
- During what hours each week is the space open for use?
- Roughly how many different people use the space in an average week? How many of these are under the age of nineteen? What is the age range of the children and teens using this space?
- What is the minimum age (if any) for use of the space? ... for use of the space without the presence of a parent or other care giver who is not part of the library staff?
- Please describe briefly the ways that children and teens tend to use your maker space.
- What do you see as the major benefits of this space for the library and for the community you serve? Has the investment been worthwhile? Please explain.
- What do you see as the major difficulties associated with creating and maintaining this space? How has the library surmounted those difficulties?
- If you answered “No” to having a maker space and you think your library would like to have this, please describe the barriers that prevent you from including a maker space.

FREE-PLAY QUESTIONS

- Does your library have any free-play opportunities? (Free play is defined as opportunities for children or teens to choose how they play. Some libraries provide spaces for artistic activities, such as creative writing or acting, open to young people as well as adults. Other libraries have programs like LEGO clubs, where kids have control of building whatever they would like with little parent or librarian involvement. Some libraries offer space for teens to “hang out” and talk or play games after school.) If “Yes”:
- What types of free-play opportunities does your library have? Please describe briefly what the program or opportunity looks like.
- How many children or teens does the program serve in an average week?
- What is the age range of those who take part in the free-play program?

- If you answered “No” to having free-play opportunities and you think your library would like to have this, please describe the barriers that prevent you from creating free-play opportunities.

Survey Results

Participating Libraries

The fifty-two libraries that responded to the survey included at least one from each of twenty-five states, distributed rather evenly across the United States. Twenty-eight of the libraries had just one location; the others were library systems with more than one location. Eight of the libraries served a population of less than 10,000; fifteen served between 10,000 and 40,000; fourteen between 40,000 and 100,000; fourteen between 100,000 and 900,00; and one served a population of a bit over 2,500,000.

Children’s Freedom to Use the Library Independently

To our question about the minimum age at which children can use the library without a parent or guardian, eleven libraries stated that they had no minimum age, one omitted the question, and the remaining forty stated minimum ages ranging from five to thirteen, with a median of nine and mode of eight.

To our question about problems or complaints that may have arisen from young people’s use of the library, nineteen libraries responded, essentially, “no” or “very little.” Most of the remaining libraries indicated that children and teens rarely caused real problems, but that adult patrons did sometimes complain about their presence. The most common complaint, mentioned by twenty-one libraries, concerned noise, and librarians most commonly responded by asking young people to keep the noise down or by helping adults find a quieter area in the library. The second most common complaint, mentioned by six libraries, involved young people’s uses of computers for games rather than for study or research, and librarians typically responded by explaining to the adults that the computers were there for recreation as well as for study or research.

All in all, the responding librarians expressed considerable appreciation of children and tolerance for their exuberance. Descriptions of complaints tended to be framed more as misunderstandings on the part of the complainers than as problems with the children. The respondent for one large library system, for example, wrote: “There are a lot of complaints about them

being loud or using the computers to play games (instead of being ‘productive,’ supposedly). We deal with the complaints by explaining the library use policy—that we value every member of our community, and every member of the community has the right to use our resources. We don’t privilege one type of use over another. If teens are, in fact, being loud, we’ll talk with them and ask them to tone it down.”

Library Maker Spaces and Their Availability to Young People

Twenty-one libraries (40 percent of the total) responded that they had a maker space, defined as a dedicated, separate area in the library with equipment allowing patrons to create things. Perhaps unsurprisingly, libraries reporting maker spaces tended to be larger, in terms of population served, than those reporting no maker space. The median population served was 129,071 for libraries reporting maker spaces compared to 36,847 for other libraries. However, the range in population sizes served by the libraries reporting maker spaces was considerable and included the two smallest in the sample, with population sizes of 1,728 and 2,200 respectively.

The single most common item of equipment listed for these spaces was one or more 3-D printers, noted by fourteen libraries. Also commonly mentioned were machines for cutting planned shapes from various kinds of material, including vinyl cutters, laser cutters, and die cutters. Other items mentioned for several libraries included programmable robots of various types, glue guns, sewing machines, button makers, snap circuits, and green screens along with other equipment for creating videos. Some librarians mentioned that the low-tech, low-cost equipment received at least as much use as the high-tech equipment.

To our question about the minimum age for use of the maker space without a care giver present in the space, eight libraries indicated no minimum age. (But one of these noted that a parent or guardian had to be somewhere in the library, and another noted that all patrons, regardless of age, had to undergo training in using the equipment before being allowed to use it freely.) For the remaining libraries, the minimum stated age for use of the maker space without a parent or guardian ranged from eight to fourteen, with a median of eleven.

To our request for an estimate of how many different people under nineteen years of age use the space in an average week, only twelve libraries provided numerical estimates. These ranged from two (for one very small library) up to 370 (for a large library system with maker spaces in five branches), with a median

of fifty. Others commented that the space was very popular or much used but did not provide numbers.

Most of the libraries without maker spaces indicated that a lack of physical space was the main reason. Eleven libraries indicated that they had a cart with maker equipment or provided temporary maker opportunities on a table in the library, and seven others indicated that they were in the process of creating a maker space or had plans to do so. Taking all these data into account, then, thirty-nine of the fifty-two libraries (75 percent) had equipment for making things in the library or had plans to provide such equipment.

Other Free-Play Opportunities

To our questions about free play more generally, forty-nine libraries (94 percent of the total) indicated that they had materials and opportunities for play for children from toddlerhood on through at least early elementary school age. The most common play items noted were LEGO blocks (by thirty-four libraries), other types of building blocks (sixteen libraries), craft supplies (twenty-six libraries), art supplies (eighteen libraries), board games (twenty-three libraries), puzzles (sixteen libraries), puppets (eleven libraries), a play kitchen (eight libraries), and dolls (five libraries). Generally, such materials could be used whenever the library was open, and ten libraries noted that they scheduled special play opportunities for toddlers and preschool children before and after story time, enabling groups of children to play together.

Forty-one libraries (79 percent of the total) mentioned that they had play materials and opportunities for teens. Of these, ten said they had a dedicated hangout area for teens, where they could play games (including video games and board games) and socialize as they pleased, and three others mentioned that they had special teen nights or afternoons when groups of teens would gather for shared, self-directed activities. Art and craft supplies and board games available for younger children were also available to teens. Several libraries mentioned special programs or clubs for teens and preteens. These included a role-playing club, anime club, manga club, Dungeons & Dragons club, Destination Imagination, Pokémon parties, and teen paint night.

All in all, the libraries in our survey appear to place value on attracting young patrons and on providing diverse opportunities for play and creativity with minimal adult control or intervention.

Case Examples

To supplement our survey in conveying what libraries can do to promote free play, we describe three instructive examples from three different libraries. The first two are from libraries with which we were familiar before the survey and which were therefore not included in the survey. The third is a particularly interesting example that emerged from the survey.

Free Play at Westbank Libraries, Austin, Texas

This is the program we know best, because two of the authors of this article, Autumn Erdahl Solomon and Leah Tatgenhorst, are library managers at Westbank and developed the play program there. This case is presented in the first person plural by these two authors.

As educational institutions, public libraries step in to fill voids and gaps that exist in the community. In the community served by Westbank Libraries, children and teens are generally overscheduled and overmeasured. There exists a self-propelling energy around achievement, which is contagious and can rob families of the joys of reading, learning, and playing just for fun. To counterbalance that, our library staff worked with a local proponent of self-directed education, Antonio Buehler, to develop Free Play. Our goal was to create a stimulus-rich, measurement-free environment that allows free choice, experimentation, spontaneous discovery, and natural collaboration among kids of all ages. In our planning, we were cognizant of the socio-emotional benefits of mixed-age play as well as the value of increased agency in navigating variable environments and new relationships, experiences that help people learn to adapt to change.

Our Free Play program occupies the large meeting room at one of our two library locations (the Laura Bush Community Library), which we set up with a variety of toys, games, books, and odd bits—cardboard tubes, boxes, clothes pins, pool noodles, sheets, tunnels, cushions, and art supplies. The space flows outward to an outdoor forecourt with a fountain and low, climbable features, and to our backyard with its garden chessboard, climbing structure, old tires, hula hoops, chalk, and kiddie pools. We typically see kids from age one up to about twelve. Parents appreciate that they can bring all their kids to the same program.

Free Play is typically held weekly on Mondays from 4:00 to 7:00 p.m. and sometimes all day on a school holiday. This extended time gives the program a relaxed, come-and-go feel. Some families will stay just a short time while oth-

ers stay the full three hours. Occasionally, we arrange for a food truck to stop by so kids can eat their dinner while they play. Otherwise, we provide snacks, including coffee and tea for care givers.

We interfere as little as possible and enjoy sitting back to watch. The kids build things, invent games, have dance parties, and devise their own competitions. Creations come to life and then are cheerfully destroyed. By the end of the evening, the room looks like an explosion of toys, snacks, boxes, scarves, forts, messy art, and game pieces everywhere. Those who stay late help clean up.

When we first started Free Play, kids went through a bit of a learning curve as they became comfortable with what was allowed, which is almost anything. Our rules are simply to stay safe, respect others, respect the space, and have fun. Noise is joyful, shoes are optional, messiness is okay, and things can be used in any imaginable way.

The learning curve for parents took longer. Initially, we created bookmarks to hand out to parents that briefly explained the concept of Free Play. Staff engaged with parents and encouraged them to let their children explore on their own, sometimes creating games with other parents and moving out of sight of their kids. Over time, new parents took their cues from the experienced ones and would read, work, chat, or play a game with other parents while their kids played. Some parents require a few visits before they learn to trust their kids and the environment, and we do not push them. Parents with very young children, quite appropriately, generally stay close to them.

After a year of offering Free Play, we introduced teen volunteers into the mix with wonderful results. Following a brief training, teens are available to play at the request of the kids, and the kids love it. They can ask a teen to read directions to them for a board game, lift them higher so they can add another brick to a growing tower, be a referee, or play a role in make-believe. We find nothing sweeter than a fourteen-year-old boy sitting down for tea with a four-year-old dressed like a princess in her imaginary castle.

The teens also help with setup and cleanup. They provide an extra pair of eyes in case a child attempts something dangerous, and they quickly chase after the occasional spry preschooler who runs toward the parking lot. But we found most exciting how much the teens we brought in enjoyed playing, remembering childhood board games, making parachute tents for the little ones, and constantly laughing.

With the help of volunteers, Free Play is managed by just two or three staff members and can draw 100 to 150 visitors on a typical Monday evening,

with more for an all-day program. The program offers an opportunity to build relationships with families, to hear more from parents about their concerns, to provide reading and reference services when asked, and to model relaxation and fun. We learn a lot from the kids about their interests by watching them, which helps us plan other programs. Free Play is inherently messy and a bit chaotic, so staffing it will not appeal to everyone.

Budgeting for this program varies. At the outset, we invested in larger outdoor games and toys along with new board games, building materials, and art supplies. Some need to be refreshed over time, so an annual allowance proved necessary. We also budget for coffee and snacks. And occasionally we surprise the Free Play group with a special treat such as a popsicle day, a hot cocoa bar, a face painting exercise, Batman showing up to play, or local fire fighters stopping by with a big red fire truck.

A quieter, scaled-down version of Free Play called Sensory Sunday caters specifically to families with children on the autistic spectrum or those struggling with sensory overload. Families are required to sign up for the Sunday program, which prevents overcrowding, and we include fewer interactive elements and place them in stations around the room to help kids orient to the space when they arrive. We also offer Arcade Night with a variety of video gaming systems, new and old, and Art Exploration with an assortment of art materials for kids to make whatever they want. Another, smaller version of the Free Play program has been offered at our other location (Westbank Community Library), which has more limited space. Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused a hiatus in programming, we are further developing our outside spaces at both locations to provide more opportunities for discovery-based play.

Anji Play at Madison Public Libraries in Madison, Wisconsin

While Madison Public Library (MPL) has long offered playful programming, learning about Anji Play inspired Youth Services Librarian Carissa Christner to think further concerning the role of play in the library. The Anji Play approach and philosophy, developed in Anji County, China, by Cheng Xueqin, promotes a child's right to "extensive, uninterrupted, and unguided true play" in safe spaces that allow risk taking and exploration and create opportunities for joyful discovery and engaged reflection (Jones 2019).

Since play was already encouraged in library programming as one practice for building early literacy skills, Christner wondered, "Would families show up at the park for a library program that was just play?" She reached out to the Anji

Play team to collaborate on the creation of an Anji Play program at her library. Staff from the Madison Parks Division enthusiastically shared sponsorship of this program by providing outdoor space at local parks, extra staffing, materials transportation, and help with promotions.

A Wild Rumpus (named by Christner after Maurice Sendak's popular book *Where the Wild Things Are*) began as a weekly program in summer 2016, and by summer 2019, it had grown into a roving, weekly event at three Madison parks. The program is anchored by an evolving set of materials, including Anji Play materials for use in children's play. The additional materials Christner selects are minimally structured, abundant, and do not have obvious, specific uses. These materials allow a wider variety of play, and because there is no right way to use them, adults can more easily resist giving children instructions or getting involved in their play. Families return to A Wild Rumpus each week, not with the expectation of finding new materials but, instead, to see how their children will engage with what is available. They have found that their children explore the materials with even more depth and find increasingly innovative ways to play when they return to the same materials every week.

Key to the success of A Wild Rumpus is the staff's ability to encourage care givers who are present to step back and observe—but not direct—the children's play. For many care givers, this is a radical (and sometimes uncomfortable) departure from the way they usually interact with their children during play. But as they observe, they often discover that their children are more capable than they had assumed, and they gain a deeper admiration for their children's abilities.

Reflection plays a central role in the Anji Play approach and philosophy. During every Anji Play program offered by MPL, children have opportunities to draw pictures and stories of their play and describe their play experiences to staff and care givers. The staff also takes photos and videos of play that it shares with children and care givers and use for its own reflection, which informs decision making about the program and guides the professional growth of staff members.

In addition to Anji Play programming, the Pinney Neighborhood Library, a branch of MPL, includes a PlayLab, an all-ages space designed for free play, care giver support, and community building, with a rotating collection of open-ended play materials and access to a patio for outdoor play. MPL also has a much celebrated, researched (Lakind et al. 2019; Willett, 2018), and playful, hands-on making-and-learning program—collectively called The Bubbler—spread across nine of its neighborhood branches and other shared community spaces.

*An Exemplary Maker Space at Indian Prairie
Public Library in Darien, Illinois*

In our survey, the response we received from Indian Prairie Public Library stood out for its description of a highly successful maker space serving a moderate-sized community in Darien, Illinois (population about 42,000). At the time of the survey, the space served an average of about 150 makers per week, most of whom were in the age range of eight to eighteen. The description that follows comes from a follow-up interview with Technology and Maker Services Senior Librarian Jack Schultz. We learned that, following the survey, the library completed a new and larger maker space, called the Maker Studio, which opened in 2021, roughly a year after the survey.

The Maker Studio presents a place for dreamers, builders, and innovators to explore and create as they wish. The equipment includes 3-D printers, cutting machines, embroidery machine, sewing machine, 3-D carving machine, laser cutter, button maker, green screen, laptops with design software, video projector and screen, and a wide variety of tools. Members can work standing or sitting, and there is a sink for cleaning up. Equipment can be reserved up to three days in advance, and some equipment requires safety training before use. The space is staffed during regular library hours and is available to patrons of all ages, though anyone under eight-years-old must be accompanied by a care giver or older sibling. According to Schultz, the response to the Maker Studio has been overwhelmingly positive.

Staff members are encouraged to remain hands-off, allowing patrons of all ages to guide their own activities, but the staff is happy to help if asked. They also model the hands-off policy for care givers whose children are engaged in creative activities. According to Schultz, the key to this is redirection. If a parent appears to be taking over a child's project, a staff member might offer the parent a tour of the space or explain another piece of the equipment to them. Shuster also noted that often the kids and teens take charge, figure things out, and teach the adults.

The Maker Studio at IPPL receives funds through grants, local partnerships, and individual donors in the community. Schultz urges all libraries to create maker opportunities in their facilities. With only two shelves to spare, a library can start with materials for simple projects that kids of all ages can use to play, such as toothpicks, popsicle sticks, glue, and other leftover craft bits. If you do not have two shelves to spare, Schultz says, "just put it on a book cart,"

and let your community start creating. Even with a small budget, a library can offer projects like candle making, knitting, or coding and robotics. IPPL supplements its Maker Studio with smaller tools available for check-out, such as 3-D pens, LEGO Boost kits, and knitting materials. The library also offers occasional classes in the Maker Studio for those who want formal training.

Conclusions and Limitation

Our goal in this research was to assess the potential for public libraries to help fill a recent gap in children's educational opportunities in the United States, that gap being a dearth of places where children can play freely, socially, and safely without adult intervention. Our review of literature on play in libraries, our survey of a sample of libraries, and our closer look at three exemplary library play programs lead us to five general conclusions.

Our first conclusion is that many libraries have taken remarkable strides in becoming child friendly. Most of the libraries in our survey reported that they welcome children over the age of eight years old even without a care giver and welcome all children with a care giver. Many libraries are developing play opportunities and other programs specially oriented toward children and teens, and they tolerate or even welcome the sometimes noisy, sometimes messy exuberance of young people. The old concept of libraries as places for quiet study and research only is giving way to a new concept of libraries as community centers aimed at meeting a wide variety of needs of people across the whole range of ages. Sometimes librarians need to explain these new library functions to older patrons who complain and help these patrons find quiet places for their work.

Our second conclusion is that there has been an explosive growth over the past decade in maker spaces in public libraries, spaces available to children and teens as well as adults. In our survey, 40 percent of the responding libraries reported that they had a dedicated maker space and most of the rest reported that they had at least some equipment for making things or were in the process of developing a maker space. Moreover, most of the libraries with maker spaces indicated that the primary users were children and teens, and all indicated that children beyond a certain age (ranging from no minimum age up to fourteen) could use the space without a care giver present.

Our third conclusion is that many libraries have opportunities for play beyond maker spaces. Initially, most of these were oriented toward children of

preschool age, but increasingly libraries have expanded and equipped their play spaces to accommodate children of elementary school age as well, and many have added dedicated places for teens to hang out, talk, and play games. In our survey, all but three libraries indicated that they had play opportunities for young children, and all but eleven indicated that they had play opportunities for teens.

Our fourth conclusion is that at least some librarians, in their maker spaces and other play spaces, have adopted a deliberate policy, to the degree possible, of nonintervention and have developed friendly ways to encourage care givers to refrain from intervening in their children's play. Truly free play requires such a hands-off policy on the part of adults, and it is in such play that children learn how to take initiative, make their own discoveries, solve their own problems, negotiate with peers, and acquire an internal locus of control. Such self-directed play is an extension of the larger generalization that libraries are places for self-directed education, in contrast to and complementary to the teacher-directed education occurring in schools.

Our fifth conclusion is that the primary barrier to play opportunities in libraries appears to be space, not money, staffing, or will. Libraries with maker spaces and other play opportunities commonly reported that the supplies need not be expensive and that self-directed patrons can use the spaces and equipment without much staff help or supervision. A second requirement, however, is tolerance by the staff of a certain amount of messiness and noise. Libraries that welcome "joyful noise" must also have one or more quiet rooms where patrons who wish to read can do so in peace. We found that some libraries, in the process of rebuilding or expanding, are doing so with the goal of providing places for play and other social interaction while preserving quiet areas.

A limitation of our survey is that the COVID-19 pandemic interfered with our ability to obtain a high rate of responses from our own selection of libraries, so we relied instead on responses from the self-selected set that responded either to our initial request or our postings on the ALA and PLA message boards. These libraries quite likely provide, on average, more play opportunities than would be found in a random sampling of libraries, so the data gathered should not be taken as a metric for determining the prevalence of such play-based programs around the country. At minimum, however, the survey provides useful information about the various ways that some libraries are striving to meet the play and creativity needs of young people in their communities.

We hope that this research stimulates further research and thought about how public libraries everywhere might become centers for play. We also hope the

Public Library Association will play a role in attaining a more complete picture of this trend by conducting regular surveys about libraries' play opportunities. We look forward to the day when a course on the nature and value of play and how to facilitate it will be part of the training of all new librarians.

The research for this article was supported by a grant from the Woodhouse Foundation to the Alliance for Self-Directed Education. The authors thank Danielle Meininger, Kelsey Flynn, and Maureen Turner Carey for helping collect and compile the survey data involved.

REFERENCES

- Almon, Joan, and Rusty Keeler. 2018. "The Rise of Adventure Play Provision in North America." *Children, Youth, and Environments* 28:67–77.
- Belknap, Elise, and Richard Hazler. 2014. "Empty Playgrounds and Anxious Children." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 9:210–31.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2016. "Quickstats: Death Rates for Motor Vehicle Traffic Injury, Suicide, and Homicide among Children and Adolescents Aged 10–14 Years—United States, 1999–2014." *Morbidity and Mortal Weekly Report* 65:1203. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6543a8>.
- Chudacoff, Howard P. 2007. *Children at Play: An American History*.
- Digennaro, Simone. 2021. "Decline of Free Play as a Form of Educational Poverty." *Journal of Physical Education and Sport* 21:657–60.
- Floyd, Myron F., Jason N. Bocarro, William R. Smith, Perver K. Baran, Robin C. Moore, Nilda G. Cosco, Michael B. Edwards, Luis J. Suau, and Kunsheng Fang. 2011. "Park-Based Physical Activity among Children and Adolescents." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 41:258–65.
- Frost, Joe L. 2012. "The Changing Culture of Play." *International Journal of Play* 1:117–30.
- Frost, Joe L., Sue C. Wortham, and Stuart Reifel. 2012. *Play and Child Development*. 4th ed.
- Grant, Richard. 2021. "New Chapter: The Benjamin L. Hooks Central Library: How Memphis Created the Nation's Most Innovative Public Library." *Smithsonian Magazine*, November, 42–53.
- Gray, Peter. 2011. "The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in Childhood and Adolescents." *American Journal of Play* 3:443–63.
- . 2013. *Free to Learn: Why Unleashing the Instinct to Play Will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life*.
- . 2020. "Risky Play: Why Children Love and Need It." In *The Routledge Handbook of Designing Public Spaces for Young People: Processes, Practices, and Policies*

- for *Youth Inclusion*, edited by Janet Loebach, Sarah Little, Adina Cox, and Patsy Eubanks Owens, 39–51.
- Hassinger-Das, Brenna, Jennifer M. Zosh, Nicole Hansen, Meghan Talarowski, Kate Zmich, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. 2020. “Play-and-Learn Spaces: Leveraging Library Spaces to Promote Caregiver and Child Interaction.” *Library and Information Science Research* 42:1–10.
- Jones, Denisha (2019). “The Five Principles of Anji Play.” *Defending the Early Years*, June 3. <https://dey.org/the-five-principles-of-anji-play/>
- Lakind, Alexandra, Rebekah Willett, and Erica Rosenfeld Halverson. 2019. “Democratizing the Maker Movement: A Case Study of One Public Library System’s Makerspace Program.” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 58:235–45.
- Lui, Debora. *Situating the “Maker Movement”: Tracing the Implementation of an Educational Trend within Public Libraries*. PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2016.
- Moore, Alice, and Helen Lynch. 2018. “Understanding a Child’s Conceptualization of Well-Being through an Exploration of Happiness: The Centrality of Play, People, and Place.” *Journal of Occupational Science* 25:124–41.
- Parrott, Heather Macpherson, and Lynn E. Cohen. 2020. “Advocating for Play: The Benefits of Unstructured Play in Public Schools.” *School Community Journal* 30:229–54.
- . 2021. “Advantages of Mixed-Age Free Play in Elementary School: Perceptions of Students, Teachers, and Parents.” *International Journal of Play* 10:1–18.
- Plemmons, Gregory, Matthew Hall, Stephanie Douppnik, James Gay, Charlotte Brown, Whitney Browning, Robert Casey, Katherine Freundlich, David P. Johnson, Carrie Lind, Kris Rehm, Susan Thomas, and Derek Williams. 2018. “Hospitalization for Suicide Ideation or Attempt: 2008–2015.” *Pediatrics* 141:e20172426. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2017-2426>.
- Skåland, Gro, Hans Christian Arnseth, and Palmyre Pierroux. 2020. “Doing Inventing in the Library: Analyzing the Narrative Framing of Making in a Public Library Context.” *Education Sciences* 10:158. doi: <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10060158>.
- Swadley, Gretchen. 2021. “Any Which Way... Loose Parts Play in the Library.” *Children and Libraries*, Spring, 21–23.
- Twenge, Jean M., Brittany Gentile, C. Nathan DeWall, Debbie Ma, Katherine Lacefield and David R. Schurtz. (2010). “Birth Cohort Increase in Psychopathology among Young Americans, 1938–2007: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of the MMPI.” *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30, 145–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2009.10.005>.
- Wang, Fengmin, Weina Wang, Sally Wilson, and Namir Ahmed. 2016. “The State of Library Makerspaces.” *International Journal of Librarianship* 1:2–16.
- Willett, Rebekah. 2018. “Learning through Making in Public Libraries: Theories, Practices, and Tensions.” *Learning, Media, and Technology* 43:250–62.