

Supporting
**FAMILY
FRIENDLY
SPACES**
in Higher Education

**FAMILY FRIENDLY
SPACES GUIDE**

Authors: Rachel Kutcher
Laura Smith, Andrea Muller





Nearly one in five undergraduate students in the United States is caring for dependent children.

“Data show that investing in the academic success of these 3.1 million students will pay lifelong dividends for these individuals and their states and could help higher education institutions meet enrollment and retention goals in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

In a recent New Mexico college student survey, 33% of respondents identified as parents or expecting parents of at least one child under age 18. The majority of these students indicated they would use one or more family friendly features if their campus had them. Creating family friendly campuses is one way that colleges and universities can foster belonging and support the success of parenting students, who are a substantial portion of the overall student population.



1 in 5

Ryberg, R., Rust, K., Balén, Z., Morimoto, Y., Allred, C., & Kutcher, R. (2024). Survey of Parenting Students in New Mexico Helps Us Understand Their Needs. Child Trends. DOI: 10.56417/9938y9431c

A young child with dark skin and short hair is shown in profile, facing right. They are wearing a light-colored long-sleeved shirt under a dark vest. The child is reaching up to place a colorful geometric toy onto a wall covered with many similar toys. The toys include various shapes like stars, circles, and triangles in different colors. The background is a plain wall, and the overall image has a blue tint.

FAMILY FRIENDLY SPACES

Family friendly spaces on campus make it easier for students to navigate campus with their kids and send a visual signal that parenting students and their children are welcome on campus. There are a variety of family friendly spaces to consider, which can be adapted to your campus layout and the needs of your students.

It's important to include staff and faculty leaders who work in or manage these spaces in the design and implementation of the space. From the beginning, part of this planning should include determining who will have ownership over maintaining the space to ensure it stays clean and organized.

"When I first started college, I didn't even know family friendly spaces were a thing. The first time I came to campus, I saw the play space in student affairs and family study room. All colleges should be accessible to children, so they can have that motivation. Then they learn 'my mom is going to college, so I can too.'"

DEDICATED ROOMS/SPACES

What type of rooms/spaces are used?

Are there any unused or underused spaces on your campus that can be repurposed?

Lactation Rooms

Under Title IX, campuses must make a lactation space available to students. "Designated lactation spaces must be clean, not a bathroom, and safe and functional for use as a lactation space. They must also be free from view and intrusion—which usually means equipped with window coverings and a door that locks."¹

If there aren't available rooms to create lactation rooms on your campus, a pod may also be a good solution.



<https://www.mamava.com/all-products>

Family Study Room

Students may not feel comfortable bringing their children into a campus library, but still need access to study spaces. Whether attached to your campus library or elsewhere on campus, a family study room where children can play and be noisy while their parents study gives parenting students important access to study and homework spaces away from home. See our case study on the SFCC library family study room in Appendix A for more ideas.



Family Lounge or Parent Resource Room

A family lounge can provide parenting students a contained place for their children to eat, play, or hang out between other commitments, and also to connect with other parenting students and their families. A Parent Resource Room can serve as a centralized information area for parenting students and should be staffed at least part time with a dedicated student parent support staff member.

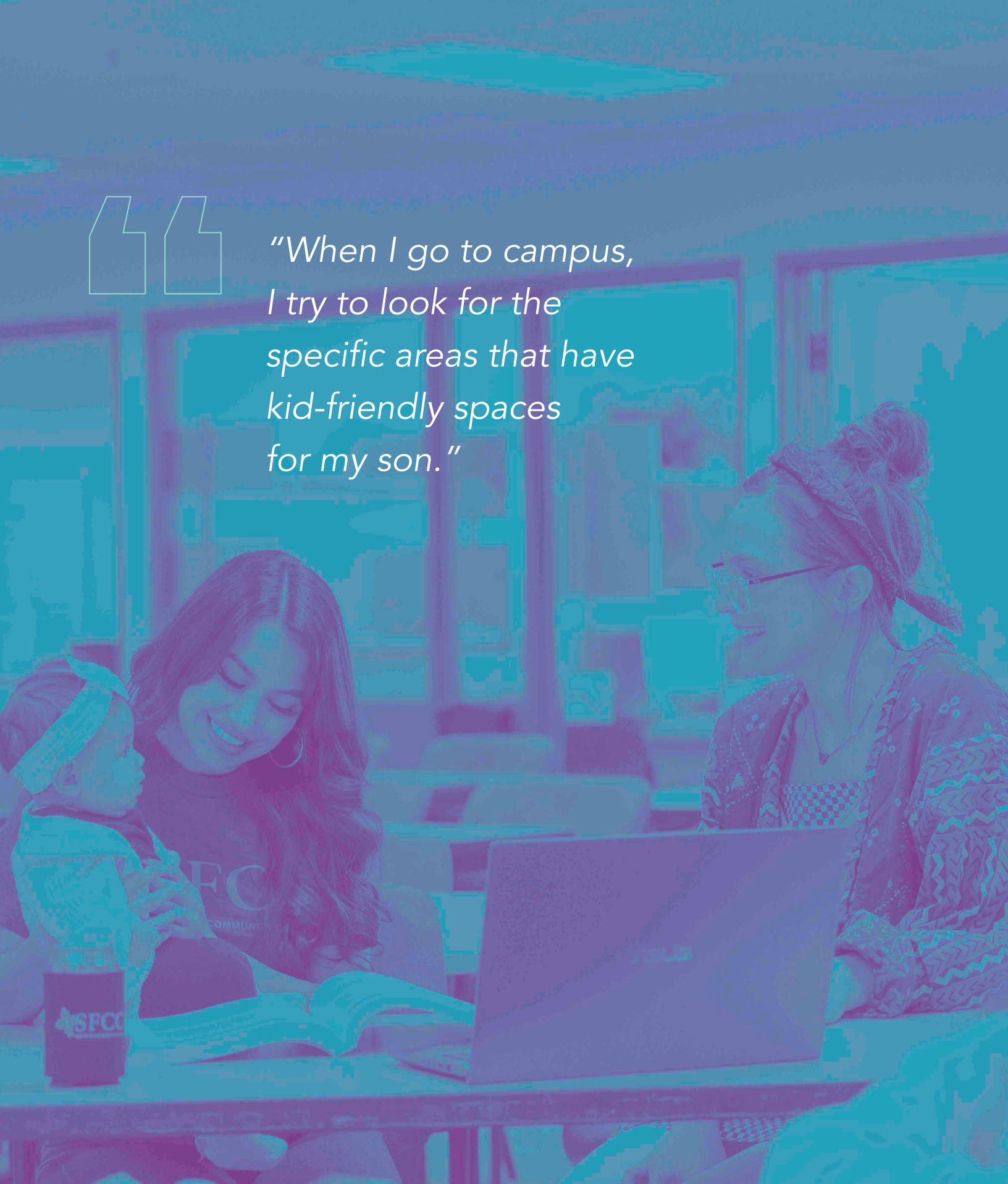
Outdoor Play Space

An outdoor play space with child safe equipment is another way to very visibly signal that children are welcome on campus. It also provides a way for children to associate college campuses with fun and to get out some energy in between a student parent's other commitments on campus. Students also recommend that the space has seating for parents to study and access Wi-Fi.

¹ <https://thepregnantscholar.org/know-your-rights-breastfeeding/>



*“When I go to campus,
I try to look for the
specific areas that have
kid-friendly spaces
for my son.”*



PLAY CORNERS AND PLAY KITS

"I really like the space in student affairs/financial aid. It takes some time for meetings in that area, so it's helpful to have the toys and coloring pages there for my son. I also like that the kids get to hang their picture up and can see it next time on the wall or in the binder."

Campuses can also create family friendly spaces in existing rooms and offices by adding a children's corner with child-sized seating and/or a rug, and child height bookshelf with some books and toys. Students and their children can use these while waiting for an appointment and temporarily borrow items from the space to use in an individual staff or faculty member's adjoining office during an appointment. Consider placing these in high-frequency student services areas such as:

- Academic advising
- Career services
- Financial aid
- Tutoring
- TRIO program
- Student wellness and health services
- Registration
- Cashier

Sometimes staff and faculty who meet with parenting students have offices dispersed across campus, away from higher traffic play spaces. An additional strategy is to create small activity bins or kits that staff and faculty can easily access in their department or office area. These can consist of a disposable/single-use activity that a child takes with them, a selection of durable toys that are kept in the office area, or a combination of the two.

Additional family friendly features

These are elements that can be added to existing areas on campus. Amenities to offer include:

Diaper changing tables in restrooms

The more restrooms with changing tables, the easier it is for students to find and use them. But it's ok if you add these to just some restrooms over time – focus on high student use areas and spreading them out around campus, making sure men and women have access to them. Adding changing tables to gender neutral restrooms on campus is an easy way to make them accessible to all adults and is often easier for a parent accompanying more than one young child on campus.

We recommend adding a symbol on the sign outside of the restroom to indicate there is a changing table.

Step stools in restrooms for children to reach the sinks

This can be as simple as placing movable stools in restrooms or installing a fixed unit such as this: <https://stepnwash.com/>



High chairs and booster seats in campus dining areas

We recommend purchasing high chairs and booster seats designed for restaurant use, for durability and easy cleaning.

Family friendly parking

It can be a challenge for pregnant students or students with young children to get the kids, strollers, and all their supplies between the car and campus spaces. Designated family friendly parking spaces can be next to current ADA-compliant ones. Curb cuts and ramps near these spaces that make a campus more accessible are perfect for strollers as well.



Campuses in which parking is not as limited should consider marking these dedicated spaces without requiring parking permits, which is less burdensome for the student.

Where parking is more limited, it may be necessary to require permits. Work with offices such as campus security, Title IX, accessibility services, and facilities to determine the needs and process for your campus. If using permits, take into account the need for students to come to campus occasionally without putting additional barriers in place.

"When I come to campus, I look for a family parking space because it's closer to the building. When I find family spaces, like the parking spaces, it makes me feel seen and included. The college knows that I need close access to the buildings because I have a car seat to carry. Accommodations make me feel included and seen."



COORDINATION WITH FACILITIES

Facilities and Operations Department

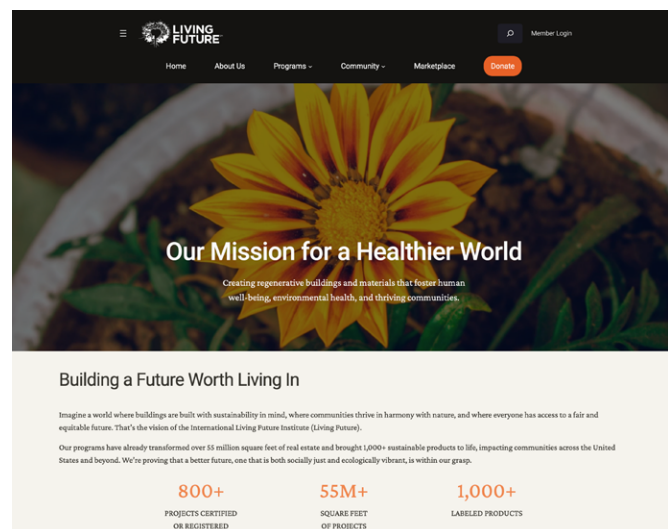
Working with your Facilities and Operations department is critical to the success of your family friendly space projects. They can help guide and direct your goals for a successful outcome by providing key information about the space you would like to transform, from installing changing tables to renovating a new family space. Guidance from facilities and operations staff may include specifications for a product, material or equipment; quotes for installation or installation by facilities staff; information about vendors; custodial needs to prepare a space for new furniture and equipment installation; grounds/maintenance support for exterior upgrades (i.e. pregnancy parking signs); safety and accessibility considerations (i.e. proper installation and ADA considerations) and comfort considerations for heating and cooling (if required).

Sustainability

Many facilities managers consider the institution's goals for sustainability when selecting new products, furniture, and materials. It is a great idea to ask them about these options to avoid use of Red List materials as outlined by the Living Building Challenge (<https://living-future.org/>) and other possible sustainability considerations, such as recycled material content.

Incorporation in Facilities Master Plan

No matter the project size, proper planning is important to meet short-term and long-term goals. Your institution is likely to keep an up-to-date facilities master plan. This plan often includes a 5-to-10-year planning outlook for capital projects and these projects may have a future impact on your family friendly space planning ideas or needs. Connect with your facilities department to be sure your goals align with any future long-term planning. Sometimes setting up a short-term space, with movable supplies and furniture, is the best option when longer term renovations are anticipated.



ENGAGEMENT AND PROMOTION

Engage Students in Design

Space is at a premium on most college campuses, so you want to create spaces that you know students will use. To facilitate use, student parents should be consulted about the types of family friendly spaces they'd most like to access on campus and the desired features of these spaces. A few strategies for engaging students in this process include short surveys, focus groups, and more creative design activities such as drawing or using basic craft materials to design a dream space. Even after spaces are created, getting ongoing feedback from student parents and staff in those spaces can help your campus continue to refine them to meet students' and families' needs.

Marketing

After creating new family friendly spaces, let students know they are available for their use. Highlighting the spaces on a campus webpage and through other campus communications can help raise student awareness of the space. Students are also more likely to use a space that feels familiar and comfortable, so find ways to introduce the spaces through more organized activities.

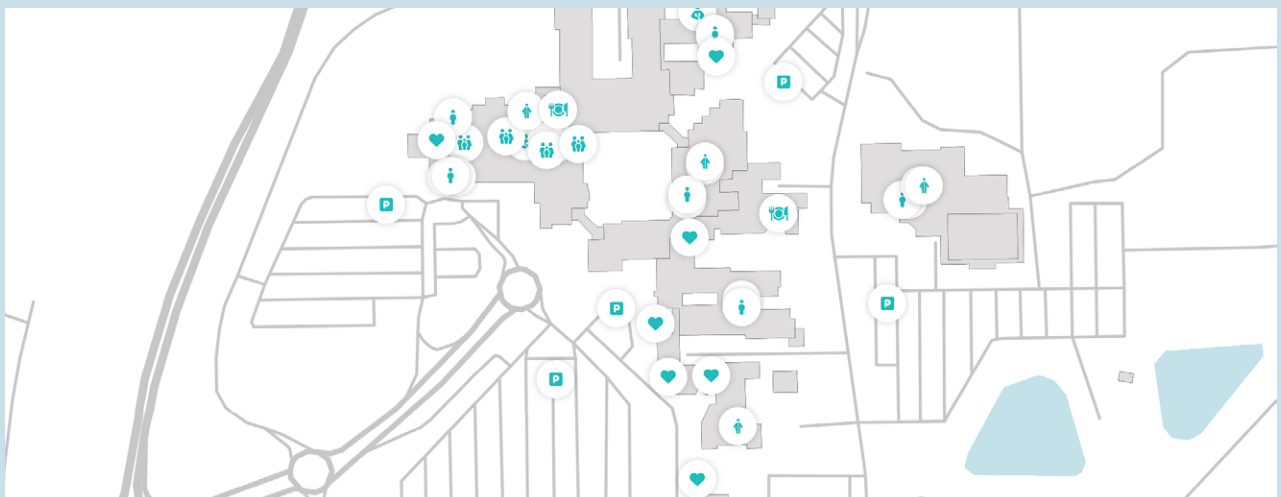
At SFCC, we've found that holding student parent coaching meetings and smaller events in our library family study room helped more student parents learn about and use the space afterwards on their own.

Wayfinding

Make it easy for students and their families to find your new family friendly campus spaces. Consider using a symbol on room signs to indicate family friendly amenities available in the space. Add these spaces to campus signage to point students in the right direction. A family friendly campus map can also help students learn about and locate spaces.

For example, Santa Fe Community College created this GPS-enabled map to show the location of family friendly play spaces, changing tables, lactation rooms, parking spaces, highchairs, and other fun campus features of interest to families.

[CLICK HERE TO VIEW MAP .](#)



FUNDING YOUR SPACES

Free Options

- Your campus early childhood center or another local early childhood program may have gently used items that they have replaced and are ready to pass on.
- Ask your local Friends of the Library if they have books they can donate

Funding Sources

- Your college foundation and college donors
- Local philanthropy such as family foundations or community foundations

Paloma's Play Corners

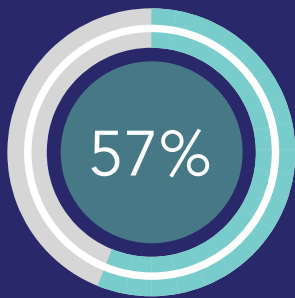
UNM ECSC Toy Lending
and Resources Library fund

<https://www.newmexicokids.org/palomas-play-corner/>

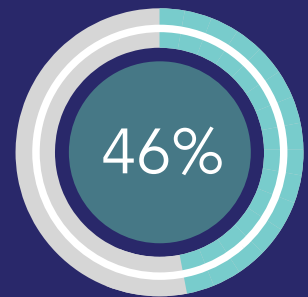
"My daughter gets really excited whenever I tell her that we are going to mommy's college. She always says 'there will be toys there for me to play with!'"



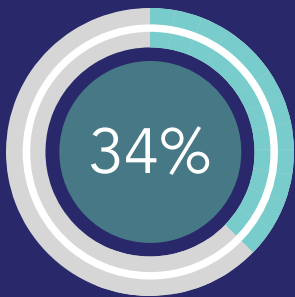
In the 2024 New Mexico College Student Experience Survey, 33% of respondents identified as parents or expecting parents of at least one child under age 18. Fifty-eight percent of those parenting students work over 30 hours/week, 76% are taking 6 or more credits/semester, and 60% report that their current child care arrangements do not cover all the hours they need. A family friendly campus is one strategy to help student parents juggle the competing demands of work, school, and parenting.



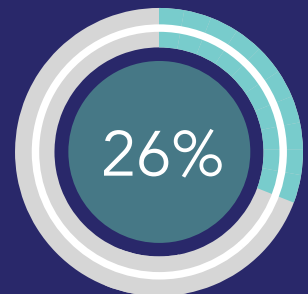
57% of student parents said they would use family friendly study spaces on campus.



46% of student parents said they would like to have family friendly tutoring services at their college.



34% of student parents said they would use play spaces in campus services offices.



26% of student parents are interested in an on-campus student parent resource center.

Ryberg, R., Rust, K., Balén, Z., Morimoto, Y., Allred, C., & Kutcher, R. (2024). Survey of Parenting Students in New Mexico Helps Us Understand Their Needs. Child Trends. DOI: 10.56417/9938y9431c



Appendix A

CASE STUDY

SFCC Library Family Study Room



In Fall 2021, staff at Santa Fe Community College (SFCC) Library set out to create a family friendly space within its walls—the first of a growing collection of purpose-built areas around campus designed to welcome student parents and their children. The post-pandemic re-opening of campus provided opportunities to rethink space use, and library staff wanted to provide a place where student parents could come and work alongside their children in a safe, engaging environment.

During the pandemic, a language lab housed in the Library went remote – and remained so after campus reopened. This room was exceptionally well-suited to serve student parents and their children, as we learned in researching similar spaces in other academic libraries: it's close to the entrance, adjacent to a bathroom, and separated geographically from other, quieter parts of the Library. We made our case to the Vice President of Academic Affairs and the College President, by presenting research on student parents and aligning the proposal with SFCC's mission and strategic goals. Connecting the dots between family friendly projects and larger institutional goals can help further your cause with decision makers and bring more support across campus as a whole. We also alleviated concerns about liability because parents/caregivers are required to remain in the space with their children at all times. Our proposal found strong support from administration, who helped negotiate with the Liberal Arts department to hand the room back over to the Library.



But there was much work to be done to turn the room into an appropriate environment for young children; we had limited funds and little idea how to spend them effectively. Cross-departmental collaboration was the key to success in this endeavor. Several colleagues told us they remembered how hard it was to go to school when their children were young, and they wanted to help smooth the way for today's parents. Each time we reached out for help, or mentioned the project during campus meetings, we were met with encouragement and the acknowledgement that we were filling a real need.

The SFCC Early Childhood Center of Excellence (ECCOE), which houses SFCC's top-notch childcare facility, donated some child appropriate furniture; we also got a book list from their First Born home-visiting program so we could start building a collection of children's books—a must for a family friendly space in a library! Campus Facilities and Operations removed old furniture, patched holes, and repainted walls in a cheerful color. They installed a changing station in the restroom next door, and were even able to divert some left-over funds from a nearby project to install durable new flooring. Our Information Technology department replaced old computers with new machines, connecting them to the printers and networks students need.



The Art on Campus staff picked fun and colorful pieces to hang on the walls; the one disadvantage of our chosen location was a lack of windows and natural light, but the artwork really helped brighten up the space.

To prioritize our own budget expenditures, library staff found that consulting at-home daycare guides pointed us toward safe and durable brands that will withstand use, as well as helping us think through what was needed. In planning any kid-friendly space, it's important to decide what age range you want to target. It is rare to have the space, budget—or indeed the necessity—of catering to all ages. We decided early on to focus on 0–5-year-olds; this allowed us to narrow the scope of toys and activities to include. As other student parent projects got started, we were able to use some grant funds to purchase high-value toys that make children eager to return, allowing their caregivers to do so as well—and work uninterrupted.

SFCC Library's Family Study Room (FSR) opened in Fall 2022, after a year-long journey. It's available to student parents and caregivers anytime SFCC Library is open, with no reservations needed.

We ask users to sign in at the front desk to familiarize themselves with the FSR policy.

The most important aspect of the policy is to underscore that the FSR is not a childcare facility; parents and caregivers must remain present at all times. The policy also reminds parents and caregivers that internet access on campus is not filtered. For the complete FSR policy, please visit:

[LibraryHelp.sfcc.edu](https://libraryhelp.sfcc.edu)

Consider employee training and buy-in, and make sure responsibility for maintaining the space is clearly defined and communicated. In the FSR, custodial staff is responsible for cleaning the floors, but tidying up is shared among library staff and our student workers. Most parents and children respect the space and clean up before they leave, but we don't expect perfection. At the recommendation of one of our early childhood students who brings her two young children to the space, to help make cleanup easier for families, we added pictures to bins and boxes to remind them where items are stored.

Ideally, we would have done a needs assessment before undertaking the project, but at the time, SFCC lacked data on student parent populations, and with the slow pace of campus re-opening during the pandemic, we didn't have an audience to poll. So we learned as we went, soliciting and incorporating student feedback whenever we could.

As one student mom recently told us, "I like the family study room because I feel motivated when I'm there. The room is really well thought out for different types of spaces and activities for children. My son can play independently because the whole room is safe for him and I don't have to bring my laptop; I can just sign into the computers there."

A version of this section will appear in the forthcoming Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) book Valuing the Community College Library.



Appendix B

SAMPLE SUPPLY LISTS

FURNITURE AND SUPPLIES

Before purchasing furniture and supplies, you will want to learn more about the ages of your students' children coming to campus, to ensure that the spaces are age appropriate.

We recommended purchasing furniture and toys from a classroom supply company for their safety, durability, and a focus on child development. Our sample list features products from Lakeshore Learning, but similar products are likely available from your choice of classroom supply vendor.

If you have an early childhood center on your campus, you can also check to see if they have classroom furniture or toys they no longer need that are still in good condition for use in family friendly spaces. Your local Friends of the Library organization may also be able to provide donated books.

If you are creating multiple family friendly spaces on campus, try to vary which toys you purchase for each space so that children will find something novel there – new toys hold their attention longer than familiar ones.



FURNITURE

Infants

[Infant Bouncer](#)

[U-shaped sit up chair](#)

[Classroom-safe glider rocker](#)



Toddlers - Elementary

[Kids Colors™ adjustable round tables](#)

[Kids Colors™ adjustable rectangular tables](#)

[Kids Colors™ stacking chairs](#)

[Indoor/outdoor floor seats - set of 4](#)

[Calming Colors® premium beanbag seats](#)

Preteens and Teens

[Adult-size bean bag chairs](#)

[Plush chairs and couches with power supply](#)

Shelving for Books and Toys

[Larger shelving](#)

[Smaller shelving](#)

[Bins for toys on the shelves](#)

- [Set of 4 bins](#)
- [Large tuff tote](#)
- [Clear view bins set](#)

[Limited space book shelf](#)

Area Rugs

[Just Like Home® seagrass round carpet](#)

[Just Like Home® branches rectangular carpets](#)



TOYS

Infant/toddler

Soft and safe building blocks

Little hands animal balls

Little hands music makers

Soft and safe mirror blocks

Stack and nest sensory toys

Feel and roll bumpy balls



Building and Manipulatives

Magnetic wonder tiles - city builder

Playful penguin ice blocks

Soft and safe flexi blocks

Rainbow stack ball track

Sensory beads lacing set

Building bricks starter set



Imaginary Play

Around town play carpet

- Magnetic vehicles

Take along train station

100 piece wooden train set

Giant classic dollhouse

- Classic dollhouse furniture

Giant treehouse

- Treehouse furniture set

AND

- Pose and play families
- Block people with different abilities

Pretend and play combo kitchen

- With indestructible play dishes
- Indestructible pots and pans
- Best buy play food assortment

Magnetic and Dry Erase Activities

If you are short on space, or just want to offer some interesting activities that kids won't likely have at home, these magnetic activities are great to offer on a freestanding or wall-hung dry erase board. Just make sure it's at a child's height.

Engineer a coaster

Magnetic gears

Jumbo magnetic gears

Create-a-path magnetic center

Dry erase crayons

Puzzles and sequencing

Big knob first puzzle set

Simple shapes puzzle board

Safari animals floor puzzle

Create-a-burger sequencing stacker

Drawing and Coloring

12 color standard crayons

12 color jumbo crayons

Animal finger crayons

People colors crayon pack

Jumbo people colors crayons

Colored pencils

People colors jumbo colored pencils

Construction paper



BOOKS

Try to select books that represent the diversity of cultures, identities and languages on your campus, in addition to different ages of readers. A good reference lists for diverse books includes:

www.ala.org



Reading List Examples:

- American Indian Library Association Children's Booklist
- American Indian Library Association MG/YA Booklist
- Asian-Pacific American Booklist(s)
- BCALA and ALSC Social Justice Reading List
- Billings Public Library Inclusive Literature
- Black Lives Matter, Black Literature Matters - Comics
- Children's Books on Arabs and Arab Americans
- Diverse Families
- Stories of Immigration



PLAYAWAY TABLETS AND HEADPHONES

At SFCC, we purchased Playaway Launchpad tablets and headphones to support safe and educational electronics use in our library and tutoring center, two spaces where parents may need a little extra help supporting their children's quiet play.



They are also available for checkout at our library circulation desk. Playaway tablets are durable, not internet connected, and come preloaded with educational games, so that's the only activity a child accesses while using the tablet.

[Playaway.com](https://www.playaway.com)

Children's headphones

(look for ones with child-safe volume limits)

Store and charge tablet station



FAMILY FRIENDLY SPACES PLANNING WORKSHEET



Family Friendly Spaces Planning Worksheet

Planning Your Family Friendly Space

Planning is key to the success of family friendly spaces on your campus. You'll want to make sure that the space meets the needs of student parents and their families, has the support of leadership, and is well received and even championed by staff and faculty on campus. Use this worksheet to help you make the case for new spaces or updating underutilized ones.

What type of space is needed?
How do you know this space is needed?
What age children are expected to use this space?

Family Friendly Spaces Planning Worksheet

Location of Space	Who will maintain the space?

Who are your campus champions (who will advocate for the space)?

Who are your campus collaborators (who can help create the space, obtain supplies, maintain it, etc.)?

Potential funding or free resources to support the space:

Family Friendly Spaces Planning Worksheet

Additional Notes and Resources