

Café au Play

Where Coffee, Community and Kids Come Together

By Daveena Tauber,
Café au Play board member

When Kristin Heying moved back to Portland with her 6-month-old daughter, she was in the process of becoming a single mom. Like a lot of parents, Kristin found that having a community of support was a necessity, not a luxury. When her daughter, Sophia, became a toddler, they began participating in parks and recreation classes – their only available option for affordable child-centered activities. Through these classes, Kristin eventually formed a close friendship with two other mothers. They discovered that finding a place to meet outside of class to talk about their parenting challenges and personal goals was difficult because few coffeehouses welcomed a group of moms with a gaggle of kids in tow.

Kristin and her friends began to envision a coffeehouse where caregivers could gather daily to find community and support while their children played together. Kristin's father, an urban studies professor, gave her Ray Oldenburg's book, *The Great Good Place*, which argues that gathering places serve a profound role in the establishment of strong communities. Oldenburg points out that these gathering places, which he calls "third places," are comfortable and affordable, drawing together people of all ages, income levels and walks of life.

Kristin realized that a conventional business wouldn't attract the level of community investment she envisioned. And a strictly nonprofit resource center would be difficult to fund. But a hybrid coffeehouse and nonprofit would combine these elements to create a sustainable funding stream for operations and family activities. Kristin began to study nonprofit management at Portland State and to assemble a board of directors, including her father, who have laid the groundwork for the organization.

Eighteen months later, Café au Play is an organization with a strong foundation and a great deal of momentum. In July, the group



Dena Wilder does "story yoga" with young friends at Café au Play's "On the Road" event at Urban Grind coffee shop.



Café au Play will help parents establish crucial social networks. Here parents meet at the "On the Road" event at Haven Coffee.

completed a six month pilot program called "On the Road with Café au Play" in which it partnered with family resource providers and performers to offer patrons a taste of the Café au Play experience at six local coffeehouses. The response was tremendous, drawing an average of 100 participants per event. "This level of response means that people really understand that social networks are a necessity for parents," says Kristin. "We talk about needing a village to raise children, but the reality is that parents face many obstacles to forming community. We want to create a space where these kinds of connections are actively encouraged."

Parental isolation is a problem that affects all social classes, though in different ways. For many parents, upward mobility spells geographic isolation from extended family and community. And while some lower-income families have deeper local roots, economic factors can prevent their accessing

available resources. The participation of teens and the elderly, both of whom are often segregated from young children, are particularly important to the mission. The older person who reads to young children feels needed and appreciated. The young child who sees teenagers perform music or drama sees possibilities for herself.

Café au Play begins with the premise that one of the best ways to support children is to nurture connections among caregivers, promote the mental health of parents, and empower people of all ages to see themselves as both givers and receivers of resources. The coffeehouse will offer both informal and structured activities for children and adults.

Café au Play is partnering with the Atkinson/Tabor Community Commons to renovate the former deli site on SE 57th and Division with a goal of opening at the site this winter. Café au Play is seeking community support in a variety of ways: funds, building materials, auction items and volunteer support. To learn more about how you can help, visit www.cafeauplay.org, e-mail cafeauplay@gmail.com or call Kristin Heying at 503-231-2707.

Café Au Play Upcoming Events

In September and October, Café au Play is partnering with local businesses for "Café au Play-dates." During these events, proceeds from food/drink sales will benefit Café au Play. On Sept. 10, come play at Vita Café, 3024 NE Alberta St., from 4 to 7 pm.

Café au Play will be holding their Winter Market Auction in early November, showcasing locally produced artisan foods, beer and wine, live music, and auction items from local artists, crafts people and businesses.

To join Café au Play's e-mail list for monthly event notices, contact Charles Heying at heyinc@pdx.edu.

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