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Playtime

GiGi's Playhouse Too is activity center for children with Down syndrome

By **Catherine Ann Velasco**
STAFF WRITER

PLAINFIELD — Brandon Paganessi, 4, likes to go down the slide.

Every time he does it's an adventure.

One time he slides down with his knees bent. The next time, he goes down while his legs are in a full split.

His mom smiles and explains. Children with Down syndrome are very flexible. When Brandon was a baby he would put his legs over his shoulders while in his car seat.

But at GiGi's Playhouse Too, Brandon isn't alone in his flexibility because most of the children there also have Down syndrome.

The playhouse, which opened in April as an offshoot of GiGi's Playhouse in Hoffman Estates, is a nonprofit awareness/activity center for children with Down syndrome and their families.

All activities are free. The center is run entirely by volunteers who lead a wide range of activities, including dances, movie nights, karaoke nights, special-needs yoga, teen clubs, infant groups, Hispanic outreach and educational classes.



JOHN PATSCH / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Children with Down syndrome play with their parents and brothers and sisters at GiGi's Playhouse Too. The center gives children with Down syndrome a chance to play together and with other children. Five-year-old Isabelle Christensen helps her 3-year-old brother, Ryan, down the slide at Gigi's Playhouse Too. Ryan, who has Down syndrome, gets a chance to play with other children and their brothers and sisters there.



JOHN PATSCH / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Five-year-old Isabelle Christensen helps her 3-year-old brother Ryan down the slide at Gigi's Playhouse Too. Ryan, who has Down syndrome, gets a chance to play with other children and their brothers and sisters there.

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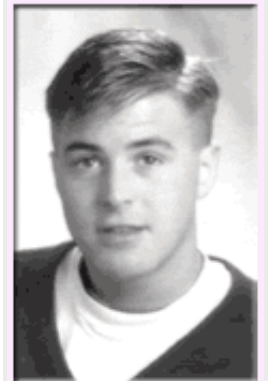
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The center survives on fundraisers and donations.

Closer to home

Paganessi and a group of five parents who enjoyed GiGi's Playhouse in Hoffman Estates came together to form GiGi's Playhouse Too closer to where they live.

The converted warehouse on South Bode Road, is in north Plainfield. Parents come from Naperville, Montgomery, Aurora and such nearby municipalities.

The entryway's walls are covered with pictures of the kids to let them know it's their place, Paganessi said.

"It's quite amazing when you think all of it was done by volunteers," Paganessi said.

GiGi's Playhouse Too is also a resource for parents. It provides books they can check out for free as well as the site for their support group that meets every other month.

Rebecca Christiansen of Oswego has 21-month-old twins, one with Down syndrome. She said the playhouse is a comfort zone for parents.

"It is nice to be able to talk to parents going through the same thing you are going through," Christiansen said.

And, it's very important for moms of newborns with Down syndrome.

"It's such a positive experience for a mom with a baby of Down syndrome. It's giving them the feeling that it will be OK. The kids are doing things that all other kids do," Christiansen said.

During a recent playgroup, the center was literally crawling with children as they took turns going down a slide, playing with toys, reading books and looking at themselves in the mirror.

"The mirror is the best thing we put in this place," Paganessi said as she watched two kids making gestures in the mirror. "It's so cute," she said.

The playhouse provides a lot of hope to parents who newborns have Down syndrome, Paganessi said.

"They can do anything anyone else can. It just might take them longer than someone else," Christiansen said.

Paganessi said they have 200 parents from the Chicago area who are on their mailing list and have had visitors from Florida and across the United States, visiting the center.

Dynamic group

Nancy Gianni, founder of the GiGi's Playhouse in Hoffman Estates, is proud of the new site.

"They are a dynamic group that did their own extreme makeover to make

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this Playhouse possible. It is truly a gift built by the parents of the kids with Down syndrome," she said. "The kids have completely taken it over. It gives me goose bumps every time I walk in there. They are spreading so much Down syndrome awareness already and they haven't even been open a year."

Anita and Kurt Pottinger of Plainfield help lead the Teen-Tastic group for youth, 12-17, which meets from 7-9 p.m. the fourth Friday of the month. There, the kids play dodgeball, have a hoop contest and do karaoke.

While the Pottingers' daughter, Hannah, is only 26 months old, the teen night provides them a glimpse of what their daughter will be doing in 10 years.

But now his daughter prefers to play with a duck toy, pulling it across the room.

Kurt likes the playhouse because it's a great network for parents who share information from doctors' names to the latest therapies.

"It's easy to relate to each other," he said "We're hoping a lot of our kids will grow up together and become friends."

Monica and Jeff Archbold of Aurora host Hispanic Outreach, which meets from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. the last Sunday of the month.

Monica, who is from Lima, Peru, said the group is important because it provides a resource to parents in Spanish. The group brings meals to share as their children play.

The playgroup is essential for their daughter, Brianna, 5, who needs more time socializing with other children, she said.

During a recent playgroup, Brianna took time out to be with her dad for lunch, sharing a spoonful of applesauce with him.

The playhouse also provides activities encouraging children to explore their talents such as singing, dancing, play-acting, arts and crafts, fitness and creative play.

"She knows all of her friends' names. They dance," Monica said.

As Paganessi watches Brandon go down the slide one more time, she said she is thankful to have the playhouse.

"It's a blessing to have a place like this," she said. "Some states don't even have support groups. We are very fortunate to have this here."

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