

# Jewish Parenting

Special Section

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A child at the Yad Sarah Center in Israel.

## Toys for special needs kids

### Yad Sarah offers place for families to play together

By Abbey Marks

*Special to the Advocate*

“Miracles happen every week,” said a volunteer at Yad Sarah’s Play Center for Children with Special Needs. “I would pay to work here.”

At the Play Center in Jerusalem, a child with special needs can develop in a playful and imaginative environment. There are art supplies, puzzles and swings. There are activities for fine motor skills and large motor skills.

In the kitchen, children can pretend to shop, cook and more. On the stage, they can perform with siblings, enabling everyone to enjoy the experience together. In the library, they can choose a book to share with a parent or a Yad Sarah volunteer.

And to continue the progress at home, families borrow books, games, CDs and computer programs all designed to advance the child’s progress in fine motor ability, thinking, social skills, language or sensory abilities.

The idea originated when Aviva Loberbaum, an occupational therapist, wanted to create a toy library.

Small ones did exist in some hospitals and schools in Israel, she said, but with a limited supply available only to those who used the facilities. Loberbaum thought more access was vital.

“Toys are a tool for development,” said Loberbaum.

She envisioned a different kind

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of library, “where everyone who wants to come can come.”

Her husband Shlomo, today the director of Yad Sarah, but then unaffiliated with the organization, thought the idea was consistent with the mission of Yad Sarah, one of the largest health and social service providers in Israel.

“He said Yad Sarah’s idea is to

provide wheelchairs for everyone, no matter who they are,” said Loberbaum. “This was like those wheelchairs, but something for children.”

The idea grew into something much bigger. Through research, Yad Sarah learned there was a demand for a toy and game library, but that they could be even more effective by establishing an entire department for childhood development.

“If families could come to the library and benefit from other things, all the better,” said Loberbaum.

The idea was a collaborative approach to help parents learn skills for playing with their children. It was consistent with a need Loberbaum had recognized in her own career. As an occupational therapist working with children, she was conscious of a conflict.

“How much time do I spend helping the child and how much time do I spend with the parents to give them ideas for helping their child?” asked Loberbaum.

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# Giving parents playful options

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She found herself devoting a substantial part of her sessions to giving parents the tools they needed to work with the children at home. And that, she said, wasn't really fair, and wasn't what she was being paid to do.

Finally, with the creation of Yad Sarah's Play Center, there is a program devoted to both concepts: professional therapy for the child and simultaneous assistance for the family. The coordinators of the Center believe educational, social and emotional skills can all be nurtured through play, a means of giving pleasure to the whole family while advancing the development of the child.

"The Play Center's uniqueness is its greatest appeal," said Play Center director Iris Magen. "Yad Sarah is the only option like this for children and their families in Israel."

The Center provides an opportunity for families to play together with professional guidance. Parents are regarded by Play Center professionals as full partners in the child's development and the active presence of the parents is a required condition for play at the Center. Particularly during times of increased stress and anxiety, the Play Center can be an oasis in the fray, providing a calm and supportive environment for children and parents.

The parents enjoy additional resources. They have access to lectures on child development and ways to cope with difficulties, and books on parenting, education, play and treatment are all available in the Professional Library. Yad Sarah is best known for lending medical equipment such as wheelchairs, crutches and oxygen machines, but for the volunteers at the Play Center, lending a toy to a special-needs child or a book to his parents is just as important as lending a piece of medical equipment to a sick person.

The involvement of siblings is also heavily encouraged; not only does it assist development and help the sibling feel included, said Loberbaum, but it's an important opportunity for the child with special needs, who is likely accustomed to one-on-one therapy with an adult, to have another kid in the mix.

"Kids and their families can plan a future together," said Sue Mednick, an American visiting from Chicago who had the opportunity to observe the Play Center participants in action. "It gives people a new vision of family life that they can have."