

A new culture of organized pay-and-play

Centres program fun on demand for parents and their kids

By CECE SCOTT
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

It's a warm, close to humid, gorgeous fall Saturday. The leaves are a harvest of fireball reds, yellows and russet. It could be beach weather.

So why am I having such a hard time finding even the hint of a parking space outside Mis-

sissauga's buzzing, pinging, crowded indoor playground, the Playdium? It takes me a good three times around the lot before I am able to screech into a tight spot, lock the door, and dodge packed vans of eager parents and wired kids on their way to a few hours of expensive "brain-candy fun."

Over the past 24 months, a new culture of play has popped up in urban strip malls and classy neighbourhoods. The outdoors has moved inside and it's only partly due to our Canadian seasons.

"It's the '90s, and people are looking for convenience," says

Tracey Ricci, co-owner of The Kidsway indoor playground on Bloor St. W.

In many families, both parents are working. Time-honoured traditions and parent/child interaction is changing. Combine this with an ever increasing shortage of playtime and the demand for establishments like The Kidsway, The Peanut Clubs and the Playdium is born, catering to a new culture of on-demand play.


Ricci's operation is located in the elite Kingsway community and markets itself to a WASPy, upper-middle-class clientele

with kids 1 to 8 years old. The professionally designed playground was built by Ricci's father Dino Ricci and husband Daniel Lang to resemble a small town, with Jackson's General Store, Joe's Garage, Sydney's Sassy Hair Dressing Salon, and familiar rooms from the home, such as a fully equipped kitchen.

The most popular area of the playground, however, is the computer area, where the two computers are equipped with CD-ROMs, all mouse-driven. In a growing number of home offices, computers are for business and off-limits to the kids.

"Families come for different reasons," Ricci says. "People, especially moms and nannies, come here to meet other people and socialize. With our urban centre and bedroom communities so spread out and time so constricted that neighbours don't know neighbours, Ricci says she provides a "friendly, safer atmosphere to meet and socialize over a bottomless cup of gourmet coffee."

Nick Taurasi, co-owner with his wife, Emily Taurasi, of Etobicoke's Peanut Club (one of four Peanut Club franchised

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