

Adath Israel's Youth Sensory Initiative

By Mitch Cohen

When students go back to religious school at the end of August, they will find four special rooms on the first level of the school building that include two new *sensory* rooms, an updated *muscle* room, and an upgraded tot playroom. Parents will be able to take their children to these rooms during Saturday morning services and when they come to family programs. I had a chance to talk about the new "Youth Sensory Initiative" with our Director of Education and Youth and Family Programming Rachel Brown. Rachel said, "Since COVID, we've been really getting people back. We've hit the ground running with our programming as a whole and youth and family programming in particular. There was also a desire from families who come regularly to Saturday morning Shabbat services to be able to take their children into an area where they can get some of the wiggles out, release some of that energy, and still feel that they're participating in the service."

Adath received funding through a grant from the Jewish Federation of Cincinnati. Rachel said, "This was the first grant proposal that I had ever written. It was submitted back in January which was also my one-year mark of being in this job. I had a lot of help from Rabbi Smolkin and different consultants, one of whom is our religious school teacher Julie Guilfoyle who specializes in childhood sensory disorders. Her background, experience, and knowledge of our students and our school were absolutely invaluable in creating the grant proposal. We received word in April that we received the grant. We are working now to set up the spaces. My goal is to have the majority of each room set up by the time school starts."

The two new rooms include a low sensory and high sensory room. Rachel said, "The low sensory room is a calming space that is quiet with shades over light sources and windows. The idea is to create a very soothing and calming environment for students who might benefit from less stimulation. It is designed to be able to be used by both individual students and by classes or groups. Teachers might choose to take their students in there and do things like meditation. They might dig into certain prayers like the Shema in a calming space where they can really focus on the words with a calming environment around them without too many distractions."



The high sensory room is a play sensory learning space for K-6 graders. Rachel said, "The older kids will be able to engage in physical activities of various kinds. There will be opportunities for teachers to use the spaces in an educational context. They might build their own Noah's Ark! They might run across rocks on the floor like they are running through the Red Sea. There are opportunities for hands-on experiential learning to take place in these spaces. It's also a space where teachers can take their older students to get some energy out when they can't go outside to the playground."

The new rooms will be open during Shabbat services. One of the priorities was to make sure the activities were OK for Shabbat. "We have a wonderful space in the Youth Lounge that our kids absolutely love. But it's not as conducive to use on Shabbat or Yontif." Parents will also be able to view live services on new screens, so they can feel part of the service while kids get some of their energy out.

Adath has had a *muscle* room for preschoolers (3 to 5-year-olds) for many years. *Muscle Room* is a term used by early childhood teachers.

You won't see preschoolers using weight machines! But you will find large motor activities that involve climbing, jumping, balance, and more. Our preschool teacher Sherry Cohen said, "Gross motor skills are important to enable children to perform everyday functions, such as walking, everyday self-care skills like dressing, where you need to be able to stand on one leg to put your leg in without falling over." She continued, "Gross motor skills have an impact on a child's endurance to be able to cope with a full day of school, such as sitting upright at a desk and moving between classrooms. Without good gross motor skills, a child will struggle with many day-to-day tasks." The Adath Israel Sisterhood donated funds a few years ago that provided upgrades to the existing muscle room. Now with the grant, additional updated equipment can be purchased.



Adath set up a separate tot play space earlier this year for 0 to 2-year-olds. With the grant, the tot play space will be upgraded with toys and decors specifically designed for use by that younger age group. Rachel spoke about the use of the muscle room and tot playroom. She said, "Those two spaces are going to be open during Mazel Tots which are on Sunday mornings once a month and for programs such as Family Fridays. The goal is to increase engagement from those younger families and help them feel welcome with a space specifically designed with them in mind."

The grant also funds sensory materials for the classrooms, Main Sanctuary, and Marcus Chapel. Rachel said this includes, "...items such as weighted lap pads, blankets, noise-canceling headphones, and fidget toys. The goal is that students who exhibit sensory-seeking behavior will be able to stay in the classrooms with their class. Their teacher can facilitate their learning." Rachel talked about the materials being accessible in the Marcus Chapel and Main Sanctuary during services. "There will be quiet items in those spaces so that parents and families don't feel like they have to take the kids out of services and can continue to participate themselves." The grant provides funds to train teachers on how to use the new materials in the classroom productively. There will also be training on how to use the new rooms. Rachel said, "There will be training on how to use these spaces both in a play sense and in an educational sense."

I concluded our interview by asking Rachel what excited her most about the new upgrades. She said, "A lot of what we have done in the last year and a half has been focused on increasing engagement across the board with everything we do at Adath. We've already seen many kids who are very excited about coming to religious school. I'm excited to expand the number of kids and families who are really excited to be in the building with us engaging with the community." ■