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Shopping at Learning Express

photo by Chris Fritchie

Playing to Learn

By Amanda VanCura

CHILDREN ARE NATURAL LEARNERS, absorbing new experiences every time they open their eyes. What else comes naturally to children? Playing, of course. Toy manufacturers picked up on this years ago and began creating a wide variety of educational toys that would enhance a child's natural growth and development. Today, parents are getting involved, going beyond the educational toy and seeking things they can do at home to help their child learn, enhance social and emotional development and promote creative thinking.

In Collin County there are several stores that cater to the educational development of children. Although many of these stores might seem more like "teacher" stores from the outside, more and more parents are discovering their benefits as well.

A NEW STOREFRONT IN FRISCO

One of the newest stores in the area. Teacher's Depot, is near Stonebriar

Centre. Don't let the name mislead you. In fact, the name simply implies there are many things available to "teach" kids.

"The biggest misconception about our store is that it's just for educators," says Mary Stewart, co-owner. "Parents would not believe the wide variety of materials available to help their kids get a boost in their education."

Ms. Stewart taught for eight years and then stayed home after the birth of her second child. It wasn't long before a publisher called her to write Step Up to the TAKS 5th Grade Science. She then began consulting around the state to help take the fear out of teaching science to students in the younger grades. With this background, she knows what types of materials parents, teachers and administrators are looking for.

"I felt like I had a very good grasp on what teachers needed to help their students," she says. "I've been in countless schools, working with countless teachers to help them help our students learn in a

fun way with high expectations."

She and her two twin sisters, Donna Degard and Dianne Biggs, opened the store one year ago.

"We chose Frisco because of the number of schools opening each year," she comments. "I also have children in the Frisco school district... Frisco is turning into a big city with the small town feel. We just love it here."

The customers of Teacher's Depot are a mix of teachers, parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers and tutors. Ms. Stewart says many parents are surprised at the wide variety of materials available. Now that it's the middle of summer, it's a great time for parents to browse the variety of summer study aids to help students transition to the next grade level. In addition, customers will find educational toys, materials that meet the needs of just about every type of learner, games, stickers, workbooks, teacher gifts, writing paper and the list goes on and on.



Workbooks for all ages
photo by Chris Frutchie

wide variety of supplies and are willing to order anything you need that they don't have on the shelves."

As a teacher and parent, Ms. Singleton also believes that stores like Teacher's Depot can be an asset to parents.

Local Educational Supply Stores

The Teacher's Depot
www.theteachersdepot.com

Learning Express
www.learningexpress.com

Constructive Playthings
www.constplay.com

Mardel
www.mardel.com

Lakeshore Learning
www.lakeshorelearning.com

LOCATIONS WITH A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Frisco residents don't have to go far to find even more stores with educational toys and supplies. In fact, at the Shops at Starwood, is Learning Express, the largest specialty toy retailer in the U.S. Independently owned, this location offers toys for children of all ages that encourage learning through play.

Soon, parents and teachers in Frisco will also benefit from Mardel, which will be located on Lebanon just east of Preston. Currently, customers can visit the Plano location where they'll find everything from educational supplies and toys, Sunday school enrichment, books for boosting your child's education at home, all with a Christian influence.

Also in Plano near Parker and Independence is Constructive Playthings, a division of US Toy. This company dates back to 1953 when founder Frances Gershon sold packaged toys to supermarkets and drugstores. The business originally sold toys, games and stuffed animals. However, Ms. Gershon, who taught preschool, discovered there wasn't a place in town to get educational toys. These were eventually added to the selection. Today, the company has eight stores from California to Florida and publishes at least 10 different catalogs offering a variety of

educational toys and supplies.

"We sell books to help at home with math, science, language and social studies," explains Brandy Guthrie, store manager. "We also have products to aide in perception and motor development as well as all types of craft kits and supplies. And, we have indoor and outdoor equipment for full body motor development."

If residents wish to venture a little further south on the Tollway, they will find Lakeshore Learning just south of Spring Valley. Lakeshore also started in the 1950s as a single toy store and hasn't stopped growing since. Today, customers will find a wide variety of top-quality educational products, from furniture and art materials to puzzles and hands-on learning kits. They even offer products that focus on multiculturalism and special needs.

FOR TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Teachers recommend them; parents enjoy the shopping and kids get the added benefit of having fun. It seems like these educational stores are a win for everyone. After all, if teachers are shopping at these stores for their own classroom supplies and materials, they must be beneficial to the kids.

"I love Teacher's Depot!" says Jennifer Singleton, Frisco ISD teacher. "I really appreciate the fact that they have such a

"Teacher's Depot caters to such a wide variety of educational needs. It's easy to find something to broaden your child's knowledge base in a fun way at home," she says.

Other Frisco teachers agree that parents should explore these stores to stay actively involved in their child's education.

"Parents can be a teacher's greatest ally," says Ben Koch, Frisco ISD teacher. "When parents are informed and are supporting academic development at home, everyone's success increases."

Many parents are already taking advantage of these places, helping to continue their child's education and get a jump-start for those that aren't yet in school. Jennifer Doublesin, mother of three girls ranging in age from toddler to elementary school, shops at Learning Express because of the unique selection.

"I think it's important for parents to take advantage of these types of stores because children need to continue to learn outside



Teacher's Depot's vast selection

photo by Chris Fritchie

of the classroom, so why not learn as they play, too?" comments Ms. Doublesin. "Learning Express offers fun, innovative toys, games, creative play gear, and more that allow children to open their minds and imagination while having fun."

BEYOND TOYS

Many of these stores also provide special events and resources. This might include product sales, professional development classes for educators, tutoring resources for parents and in-store events.

Parents in need of a tutor for their child can inquire with Teacher's Depot for a list of names and numbers of available tutors in the area.

"We know how expensive it can be to go through a tutoring agency, and we thought this was a great way to help our customers get a direct link to teachers they wouldn't necessarily know to call."

Teacher's Depot, as well as other stores such as Lakeshore Learning also offers special classes for teachers.

"We have offered 'Make and Take' workshops targeting elementary science teachers," says Ms. Stewart. "We have also had Frogstreet Press, an early childhood publishing company, come in and host a workshop for early childhood educators.

At Learning Express, customers can take advantage of the complimentary birthday box. Children can pick out what they would like to receive for their birthday and friends and family can come in and make the purchase for a discounted price.

Parents and kids can attend science days in July at Constructive Playthings. These hands-on fun days allow the kids to play with goo, try an experiment and learn to love science.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

Since the beginning of time, children have not liked to study. They would much rather play, and if you have their interests at heart, you will let them learn while they play; they will find that what they have mastered is child's play. - Carl Orff, German educator and composer

All around Collin County, these stores are promoting child's play, providing new products and resources to help parents and teachers make learning fun for kids.

"In a community where parents are very actively involved in students' education, having direct access to supplies and resources is important," adds Mr. Koch.

Even though it's summer time, it doesn't mean kids have to stop learning. Whether it's getting your child ready for

the next grade level or trying out some educational materials disguised as toys, kids of all ages can benefit. Take this time as an opportunity to explore these stores and let your child's imagination run wild. While they're learning to play with their new toys, they'll never even realize they're playing to learn.

Amanda VanCura is a freelance writer living in Plano.

Upcoming Events

July 21, 9:30 – 11:30 a.m.
Teacher's Depot 1st Birthday

Saturdays, June 2nd – August 25th
Lakeshore Learning, craft activities
for kids, 11 a.m. – 3 p.m.

July 14th, July 21st
Constructive Playthings Science Day,
10 a.m. – 2 p.m.

September 29th – Stephen Fite,
children's recording artist, two-hour
workshop at Teacher's Depot