



The Big Room for Little People

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Twelve 3- and 4-year-olds stand in a circle on a braided oval rug, a pool of deep wine-colored fabric on the stark white tile floor in a big room made for little people. They sing, "Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes" while trying to coordinate their movements to the words they sing. Eight little girls and four little boys brim with energy finding release through the movements and the song during morning circle time in the Little Bucs Sunflower Room; it is 9 a.m.

Light comes in through a square, double window, spanning nearly half the height of the wall and gently illuminating the far side of the room, opposite the door. Under the window, books are arranged on kid-sized bookshelves close to an oversized, brown-leather reading chair. Shelves high on the left wall close to the corner by the window hold plastic containers with the Kaelyn, Payth, Olivia, Rose and other names printed on the front. Inside are blankets for naptime, stuffed animals for comfort and changes of clothes in case of a mess. Nearer to the door, there is a single shelf for the varied assortment of princess, Dora, Diego and Thomas the Train lunch boxes.

Between the shelves and the children, a model kitchen, made of unfinished wood, waits for the children to pretend their next meal. Plastic pots and pans stand stacked alongside the stove, toy cups, plates and utensils rest neatly on the kitchen's countertop. Beyond the kitchen, a small coat rack holds a doctor's lab jacket and stethoscope, a cowboy hat, a princess dress and other assorted costumes pieces waiting for the imagination of a child to bring them to life. Overhead, gentle, yellow light comes down from Japanese-style hanging lanterns with small granite and mauve flowers painted on the lilac globes. Absent of harsh fluorescent light, the room feels warm and comfortable, more like grandma's house than a classroom.

The children finish their song and seem more sedate after the exuberant physicality of the song and dance. Soon, it will be snack time. To the right of the door, close to the corner, two kid-sized tables surrounded by kid-sized chairs wait patiently for snack time, and, afterwards, for creating pictures and crafts. Beyond the tables and along the right wall, a ramp rises toward the far, windowed wall, leading to a "second story" play area, filled with dolls and plastic trains, books and oversized pillows. The area under the second-story structure is a hideaway for the kids, dim and quiet, perfect for reading, or making up stories or games. The two-level structure resembles a bunkbed for giants, spanning the length of the wall.

At a small round table next to the door, just tall enough to keep its contents hidden from the curious hands of the children, sits the sign-in sheet. Here is where parents document their child's comings and goings and pick up information concerning their child's day. It's the only thing that seems grown-up in the room. The rest of the room is an oasis of childhood innocence in the desert of adult responsibility.

At the appropriate time, the children take their places at the table for snack time, happy and comfortable in the Sunflower Room.