

# Chapter 10

## Kids in the Library: Enacting Joy in the Academic Workplace Through the Creation of a Family Study Space

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### ABSTRACT

*While children's services are traditionally associated with public libraries, the increase in students with dependent children means that academic libraries are increasingly being called to provide family-friendly spaces. Using the University of Maryland Libraries as a case study, the authors detail the process of developing, implementing, and overseeing family-friendly services, including a family study room and activity kits for children. They argue there is value in welcoming families into the academy and projects, such as a family study room, worthy not only for the contributions they make to the community but also for the opportunity to enact joy in our daily practice as academic librarians.*

### INTRODUCTION

While children's services are traditionally associated with public libraries, the increase in students with dependent children, along with the expense and the difficulties of arranging childcare means that academic libraries are increasingly being called to provide family-friendly spaces. Using the University of Maryland Libraries as a case study, we detail the process of developing, implementing, and overseeing family-friendly services, including a family study room and activity kits for children. We argue there is

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value in welcoming families into the academy and that projects, such as a family study room, are worthy not only for the contributions they make to the community, but also for the opportunity to enact joy in our daily practice as academic librarians. We share lessons learned, examine the ways that the family study space and related services are supporting the emotional well-being of our caregiving community, and explore how this project strengthened the emotional well-being of our library staff members.

## **INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT**

Founded in 1856 as the Maryland Agricultural College, the University of Maryland (UMD) is the state's flagship university and one of the original land-grant institutions in the United States of America. UMD is home to more than 41,000 students (31,000 undergraduate and 10,000 graduate), 14,000 faculty and staff, and 250 academic programs. As a public research university, UMD has a strong commitment to research, entrepreneurship, and innovation. Due to its close proximity to Washington, D.C., the university has both a strong regional identity and also a national presence.

The UMD Libraries is an eight-library system housed at the flagship institution in College Park, Maryland. Given the institutional focus on faculty and graduate research and undergraduate education, the UMD Libraries has developed resources and services around these populations. For example, the UMD Libraries offers research data and scholarly communication workshops and services for graduate students and faculty and targets outreach events, such as social media campaigns and yoga breaks, at undergraduate students.

In line with overall trends in higher education (Espinosa et al., 2018), caregivers are a growing population within the UMD campus community. According to a 2017 campus survey, 15% of UMD graduate students reported caregiving responsibilities for children 16 and younger. Of those, nearly 70% identified themselves as the primary caregiver to children under the age of 10. In 2019, 1.7% of UMD undergraduates identified as parents or primary caregivers. That percentage is much higher for our undergraduates who are military veterans, of whom nearly a quarter (24%) self-report as primary caregiver to dependent children. These numbers parallel national studies from the past decade, which indicate that, on average, one in five (22%) undergraduate students are now raising children (IWPR, 2018).

## **POSITIONALITY STATEMENTS**

We would like to begin this conversation by sharing our positionality to the work; which is the idea that a person's position, or relationship, with a topic or a community, is impacted by their social identities, values, and experiences. As professionals, we bring a positionality to our work, and as partners, mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends, we bring it to our lives. Our positionalities are why we care, why we strive, and why sometimes, we will fail; because as much as our experiences empower us, we are also limited by our perspectives. A positionality statement is a recognition of the inter-dependability of these two things and acknowledgment of the relationality inherent within our personal and professional identities.

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### **Rachel**

I identify as both a teacher and a librarian. Although, as a unit head, my work now focuses on programmatic management and supervision, I still consider teaching to be at the center of my praxis. My work as both an educator and a librarian is rooted in ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982), which attends to the relationality and interconnectedness of the human experience and our responsiveness to others within that space. Though my interest in creating a family study room was not tied to personal experience, some of the planning and execution of the space intersected with my own journey in becoming a parent, which has made this project particularly poignant. My positionality as a parent has also brought an increased compassion for and commitment to our campus caregivers. When the family study room opened in 2019, I was a parent to a 9-month old baby and dealing with the daily struggles of navigating spaces and places with a small child. There have been many times where we have stood in a building that was not designed for families and wished that I had somewhere for us to be where we would not feel in the way. It was a privilege to be a part of creating such a space for our campus community.

### **Kelsey**

I came to this project like I do many others - seeking practical solutions to a challenge, which in this case was both personal and professional. My work at UMD revolves around graduate students and faculty, populations who are more likely to be caregivers to small children. At the same time, I had a four-year-old and a new baby when writing the family study room proposal. I was intimately familiar with the panic induced by a call from a childcare provider that they were sick, and I needed to find alternate arrangements, which frequently involved a screen and headphones in the back of a meeting room or hoping for appropriately timed naps to be able to get some work done. What served as occasional childcare hiccups for myself are constant challenges for others, especially graduate students relying on a stipend that does not even begin to cover full-time childcare in our area. I was happy to be able to contribute my experience as a parent to this project, and the reception by UMD parents has warmed my heart.

### **Karina**

While I have always felt comfortable in library and academic spaces, I understand that this sense of belonging is a privilege of my positionality. Something that has stuck with me is always asking, 'how can I prop open doors that have been opened for me so that others can come through?' My interest in rethinking access, outreach, and general perceptions of belongingness in library spaces brought me back to school after years in university events. I had experienced how creative, learner-centered approaches had created inclusive physical and affective spaces on my alma mater's campus. I knew I wanted to be further involved in the work of developing welcoming environments for learning, success, and a general belongingness. Engaging students in library spaces through instruction and coming into my identity as a teacher has continually transformed my ideas about librarianship and the unique potential academic librarians have for reconceiving higher education as a space for all. The family study room has been an extension of this work in increasing comfortability and ownership in the library and such a special project to be a part of.

*Kids in the Library***LITERATURE REVIEW**

Despite a growing field and accompanying body of literature in happiness studies (Ahmed, 2008, 2010), works on happiness in the workplace -- particularly moments of joy -- tend to focus on self-actualization, economics, and productivity, or specific fields such as social work and teaching. Joy in academia, as a whole, remains theoretical and is situated primarily in feminist approaches, such as exploring emotion and affect in geography (Ahmed, 2010; Gannon et al., 2019; Kern, Hawkins, Al-Hindi, & Moss, 2014); geography, in this case, referring to the body as a site of discourse, such as identity or labor. The lack of meaningful empirical research is likely due to constraints on data collection, which relies heavily on self-reporting by participants (Ahmed, 2010, in addition to conceit of what is seen as “real” academic work (Ahmed, 2010; Kern et al., 2014). While this gap reveals a need for further study, it also speaks to the difficulty of pinpointing one understanding, approach, or outcome of joy in academics or academic librarianship, which sits at the intersection of so many of the aforementioned roles and ways of being.

Ahmed (2010) argues happiness requires affect, intentionality, and evaluation. Finding micro-moments of joy requires us to set aside coping mechanisms of cynicism and detachment, which are created in response to the pressures to perform in the university (Ahmed, 2010; Kern et al., 2014), and ask us to apply creativity in our everyday mundane responsibilities (Gannon et al., 2019; Kern et al., 2014; Sherman & Shavit, 2018). In other words, happiness requires workers to enact both intention and pursuit. This resolve to seek out joy typically emerges as a reaction to negative emotions surrounding emotional labor and work engagement (Burić & Macuka, 2018; Kern et al., 2014). While attuning to happiness is a sustained effort, finding joy in academic work is less about quantity of hours worked (Sherman & Shavit, 2018) and more the quality and efforts put into reconceiving everyday tasks and building in passion projects to reconnect with our ideal notion of our academic ‘selves’ (Kern et al., 2014; Sherman & Shavit, 2018). Seeking and sharing joy in academia can be seen as a radical praxis that counters a default apathy and narrow focus on productivity (Gannon et al., 2014; Kern et al., 2014). By pursuing happiness, we create positive and safe workplaces, which, in turn, increase satisfaction among inhabitants. Through joy, we not only reinforce positive relations between our colleagues and students, but also create opportunities to attend to our own well-being (Ahmed, 2008, 2010; Fowler & Christakis, 2008; Gannon et al., 2014; Kern et al., 2014; Sherman & Shavit, 2018).

**PROJECT BACKGROUND**

In 2017, the University of Maryland (UMD) Libraries staff were encountering circumstances familiar to many academic libraries; several years under the leadership of an Interim Dean, budget shortfall, and cuts to the collection. On a personal level, Kelsey and Rachel were experiencing the symptoms of professional burnout. We had both entered the UMD Libraries as public services librarians and had quickly become unit heads, amassing administrative and supervisory responsibilities. We were on track to submit our dossiers for promotion and permanent status two years ahead of our mandatory dates, which meant that we had both been in a rapid cycle of research, presentation, publication, and service. We enjoyed our work and were grateful for opportunities we had been afforded, but, at the same time, we were weary, which was a sentiment echoed throughout the Libraries. The family study room was born out of a desire to speak joy into our library spaces and practice and was a direct response to the fatigue that we were experiencing on both a personal and institutional level.

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Like most college campuses, the University of Maryland (UMD) was not designed with the needs of children or families in mind. In a study on the creation of family spaces in academic libraries, Godfrey et al. (2017) note many of the typical family-oriented spaces, such as lactation rooms, focus on female caregivers and are designed to support the needs of parents, rather than families. Graff, Ridge, and Zaug (2019) assert that without specific policies and spaces dedicated to integrating families on campus, an institution tacitly communicates that children should be rarely, if ever, seen or heard on campus. Keyes (2017) argues that while few academic libraries actively welcome children, adjustments to the tone and language in policies and the addition of spaces or resources (such as activity kits) directly supports campus caregivers and decreases attrition rates.

While UMD offers a number of lactation rooms and gender-neutral restrooms spread across campus, there were no family-friendly spaces for caregivers and their children. When caregivers elected to bring children to the library - or anywhere on campus - they did so without expectations of space or services dedicated to their needs. Inspired by a presentation at the Library Assessment Conference on the creation of a family space at Brigham Young University Library (Belliston and Zaug, 2016), we started to think about how we might create a family study room at UMD Libraries.

In 2017, an extensive space renovation in McKeldin Library was nearing completion, and a large office space was opening up, with no established plans of how that space would be repurposed. Inspired by the circumstances, we proposed converting the space from an office to a family study room, which would provide a safe, clean, and accessible location for faculty, staff, and students of any gender identity to study alongside their children under twelve years of age. The proposed family study area would not only meet a need among caregivers, but would also preserve quiet study space for other library users, who might find it difficult to share open-work space with children. In addition to supporting the mission of the UMD Libraries to create a learning environment that meets both the “research and community outreach mission(s) of the university,” the family study area also supported a broader UMD Campus Climate Initiative to create a “safer and more welcoming campus.”

Unfortunately, the proposal for the family room was submitted during a competitive year for facilities projects, and the Libraries declined funding. Determined to make the family space happen, we took a year to regroup and strengthen our proposal. Feedback from library administrators on the original proposal had included concerns around safety, administration, and policies for the space. To address these, we began by expanding our team of collaborators within the Libraries to include access services staff, who would be responsible for overseeing space-related policies. Together, we drafted a detailed proposal which included a stronger justification, an itemized budget with projected costs based on previous projects, potential campus partners, and policies that would guide use of the space (see Appendix 1). While we had originally targeted an empty office space as the location for the family study room, the office was located on a designated quiet floor. At the suggestion of our new team members, we updated the proposed location to an existing (but less frequently used) group study room located on a collaborative floor. Some staff members who were familiar with the high demand for many of our study rooms expressed concerns that re-purposing this space would negatively impact room availability. Fortunately, the high usage by families addressed these initial concerns after the room opened. We also added the cost of relocating the existing lactation room to be in closer proximity to the proposed family study space and the addition of changing tables to bathrooms on several of the floors. All of these served to strengthen and solidify the project.

In response to concerns around cost and scalability, we added a tiered service model that included not only space, but also “family kits,” which were children’s backpacks filled with books and toys that

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could be checked out and used anywhere in the library. The activity kits were affordable (total cost to the libraries was projected to be about \$200) and could have been implemented with or without the family study space. In the event that the full proposal had not been funded, the family kits could have served as a first step toward creating a more inclusive environment for families and would have provided usage data that we could have used to strengthen our proposal in the future.

Our final change was to explore alternate funding. At the recommendation of our Associate Dean of Research and Academic Services, we submitted our proposal to the UMD Student Facilities Fund, a campus-wide initiative to provide funding for student supported facilities projects and improvements that will positively impact and enhance the student experience at UMD. We were delighted when the Student Facilities Fund elected to fund our proposal in full, including not only the family kits, but the full family study room. In 2019, we received the funding and approval to begin the renovation of the family study room.

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

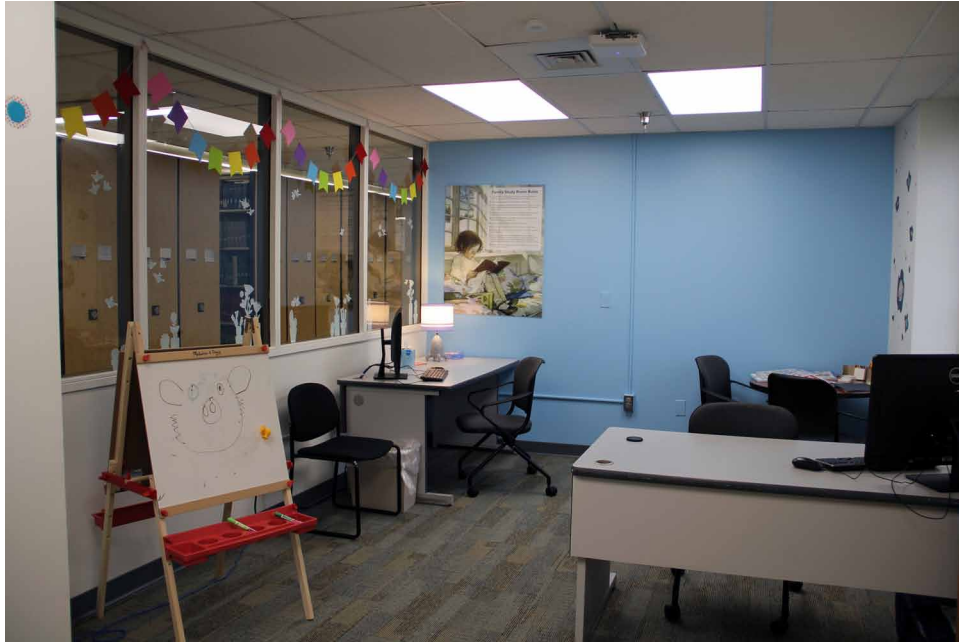
To convert the group study room to a family study room, we started with safety upgrades to the space. These included removing blinds from external and internal windows, cleaning the carpet, repainting walls, and installing outlet covers. The existing group study room had been sparsely furnished, with a large table and chairs. To accommodate the varied needs of our families, we added two computer workstations and repurposed furniture that had been underutilized in other library spaces, including two desks, a round table, moveable chairs, and a small bookshelf. We also made strategic purchases of new furniture, including a child-sized loveseat, chair, table, colorful rug, drawing easel, and throw pillows.

As we were writing the proposal for the family study room, we reached out to potential campus partners to gauge interest. One such partner was iDiversity, a student group in the UMD College of Information Studies with a mission of “integrating diversity into LIS practice, research, technology & education, and fostering discussion on representation & inclusion.” iDiversity responded enthusiastically and quickly arranged a donation drive for children’s toys and books and used proceeds from a bake-sale to purchase a few bigger ticket items, such as puzzles and games. As a result of their generosity, we were able to assemble the family room collection almost entirely from donations. This enabled us to focus financial resources on structural improvements, such as adding additional changing tables in the building.

We were fortunate that the donation from iDiversity included enough supplies to also assemble the “family kits,” which can be checked out by caregivers and used anywhere in the library. Our kits—targeted at age groups 0-4, 4-8, and 8-12—feature developmentally appropriate materials such as books, crayons, puzzles, small toys, coloring books, and games. The kits were incorporated into the equipment loan program and located at the Tech Desk, which manages the loan of other non-traditional items such as laptops, chargers, yoga balls, whiteboards, and hammocks. Each kit is housed in a backpack (purchased with funding from the Student Facilities Fund) and marked with a luggage tag featuring a barcode and itemized list of contents. The patterns on the backpacks correspond to the age groups: 0-4 features dinosaurs, 4-8 zoo animals, and 8-12 rockets, which help staff quickly identify the appropriate kit for each child.

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*Figure 1. Workstations in the family study room.*



*Figure 2. Children's books, toys, and furniture brighten up the space.*



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Figure 3. Family kits feature books and toys to keep little ones occupied



As with everything in academia, pulling the family room and kits together was slow work that required coordinating with campus facilities, administrators, administrative assistants, library staff, and campus partners. From the beginning, this project has been a labor of love. We spent hours sourcing materials from a play-mat to multi-colored chalk. Because these items were unavailable through our typical vendors, the purchases required permissions to go outside of our approved suppliers. To make the room cheerful and welcoming, we went to the local dollar store to purchase garland for the windows, storage containers, wall stickers, and art supplies. We made signs for the walls, hung clotheslines for children to hang their artwork, ironed pillowcases, decorated windows with stickers, packed backpacks, designed luggage tags, and laminated informational sheets with resources to be included in the room and kits.

While creating the space was time consuming (approximately six months), it was a project that brought joy to our work. It also created opportunities to collaborate with staff members from across the Libraries, including access services staff members, who would be the ones responsible for enforcing policies and checking out the kits; public services librarians with small children, who were able to provide input on the kits' contents; and outreach and communications staff, who helped develop promotional campaigns and create signage. We were also fortunate to welcome a graduate assistant (Karina) to our team, who has brought a new perspective to the work.

When the room was completed, it was added to our online room reservation platform (LibCal), which the UMD Libraries had already been using to allow users to reserve study rooms in our various libraries. Families who want to reserve the room can do so from our main room reservation page. No login is required to book the room, although users do need to enter some key data pieces (name, email, number, and age of children). The booking page is also displayed on an iPad just outside the door of the family study room to allow families who have not booked in advance to make a real-time reservation.



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LibCal sends automatic reminders and also facilitates cancellations and changes. It also compiles usage statistics, which are explored further in the next section.

To assess the usefulness of the space to the community, we provided comment cards in the family kits and in the family study room. These were blank index cards with the prompts, “What do you wish you had in the kit / room that we did not provide?” and “Is there anything about your experience that you would like to share?” Comments from users were endearing and thoughtful, ranging from children who made actionable suggestions such as adding an above ground pool, petting zoo, and Legos, to parents who expressed their gratitude for the resources and pointed out specific elements that were helpful to their family, such as having a Pack-and-play in the room for naps.

## **RESPONSE TO THE FAMILY STUDY ROOM AND FAMILY KITS**

While caregivers are present within our campus community, the proportion of students who identify as parents is relatively small (2% of undergraduate students and 15% of graduate students, or 5% of the overall student body). When we launched the family study room in November 2019, it was with the modest hope that the space would be utilized once or twice per week. After a soft opening in early November, we did a small publicity push to announce the space and activity kits on the UMD parents’ listserv and library website. We also asked subject librarians to share news of the space with their departments and asked the UMD Teaching and Learning Transformation Center (TLTC) to include the new services in their newsletter, which is distributed to faculty and graduate students who have attended teaching workshops or events through the TLTC. We were surprised and delighted by the overwhelmingly positive reception from the campus community. During the first two and a half months they were available, the activity kits were checked out a total of 25 times. The 0-4 and 4-8 age groups were equally popular, but the kit for older children was only checked out one time. The family room itself has seen much higher traffic than we initially expected. Between October 1, 2019 and January 31, 2020, the room was booked for 166 hours by 89 unique users through our online room booking platform. Eight users have booked the room more than twice during that time frame, and a very cursory review of the user list indicates that not all users are female caregivers. Most bookings are scheduled on weekdays (just over 80%), but the room does get booked on weekends as well, when there are very few traditional childcare options available.

In the weeks following the opening, we received dozens of emails from thankful parents on campus. The comments ranged from Ph.D. students grateful for a spot to bring kids when visiting campus, to adjunct instructors who planned to hold office hours in the space to avoid paying for childcare, to staff members with now-adult children who reflected on how much they would have appreciated such a space when their children were small. The prevailing sentiment from caregivers was that the family room made them feel seen in a way they had not been prior. In a campus news article published about the family room, a graduate student is quoted, “I actually got misty-eyed. I got emotional when they told me this existed. It made me feel really good.... Knowing that it’s there and the university did that, it feels like I matter. It feels like parents matter” (Pottiger, 2020).

We are also delighted to have received an outpouring of support from the larger library community. After sharing on Twitter about the family kits, we were invited by American Libraries to write a short article on the family space and activity kits, which also served as the basis for this chapter. We received emails from a number of librarians interested in creating family spaces or resources at their libraries and were able to share our original proposal, budget, policies, and other documentation with those institu-

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tions. It is important to note that we are not the first academic library to have created a family space and were, ourselves, inspired by similar spaces at Portland State University (Petit, 2014), University of North Carolina at Charlotte (Moore, Croxton, & Sprague, 2019), Brigham Young University (Belliston & Zaugg, 2016; Graff, Ridge, & Zaugg, 2019), Portland Community College, and Southern Illinois University, among others. We are proud to be a part of a growing movement to create inclusive spaces for parents.

## **OVERSIGHT AND MANAGEMENT**

As with any project, we have learned lessons and made improvements to the space, policies, and processes surrounding. While we intended for the family study space to be self-managed, the higher-than-anticipated usage has necessitated more frequent maintenance. Once or twice a week, we stop by the family room to tidy and restock materials, check for broken or damaged items, attend to any safety or maintenance issues (such as missing outlet covers), and collect comment cards left by users. This day-to-day management was not something that we originally anticipated or accounted for in the proposal, but has allowed us to continue interacting with the space and users in a way that we would not have if the room had been largely self-managed.

Like most academic libraries, UMD Libraries struggle to provide adequate space to meet student demand, particularly during peak times in the semester, such as reading days or exam week. When we made the decision to keep the family room locked and have caregivers check out a key, it was not with the intention of restricting access for the broader community, but rather, to provide a space for caregivers that was built to accommodate their needs. That included not having to do the labor of asking others to vacate the space. Several weeks after opening the family room, we learned non-caregiver users were occasionally reserving the room through our online booking system. To ensure that the family room space would be available for caregivers, we updated the booking policy to specify that users must have children with them to pick up the key and added a question in the request form that requests the age of accompanying children. These modifications have not only served to honor the intention of the space, but have also provided additional data that has helped us to improve the space by adding age-appropriate materials to the collection.

The volume of bookings and users has required more frequent restocking and replacement of consumable goods, such as crayons, drawing paper, sanitizing wipes, and tissues, than originally anticipated. In response, we added a small cabinet with extra supplies that can be utilized by caregivers as needed. Since the majority of users have children ranging from 2 to 7, we added a first aid kit, extra diapers and wipes, diaper disposal bags, and garbage bags. We also requested housekeeping visits be increased from once a week, to twice a week, and added an extra garbage can to account for inevitable messes.

We have also added furnishings and materials. In response to the number of users under the age of 5, we added a pack and play donated by the UMD Child and Infant Studies Consortium. We also added a coat rack for parents to hang jackets and backpacks, a play tent with pillows for children to read in, and manipulative toys (such as Legos and blocks). In the future, we plan to add a bulletin board to share events or resources relevant to the campus caregiving community and upgrade the art display area - which has been wildly popular among our child users and far exceeded the capacity of the hanging clotheslines originally dedicated to the purpose.

***Kids in the Library*****CONCLUSION**

Having participated and led many initiatives in our library, the family study room has undoubtedly been the most positively received and joyful project we have been privileged to be a part of. What started as a way to resist burnout and institutional malaise has become a space that directly supports the success and well-being of an underserved population on our campus. Although we are delighted that the family study room and family kits are being utilized frequently, even if the space had met our initial expectations of being used once or twice a week, we would have considered the project to be a success. Not only has the family study room brought awareness and visibility to our campus caregivers, but it is also a tangible representation of our values and commitment to the campus community.

In addition to serving the community, the family study room has brought a renewed sense of purpose to our work and enabled us to create a community of practice that included not only librarians, but also graduate students and campus partners. Throughout the project, we have affirmed, amplified, and pursued joy; and that attention to the way that the space not only functions, but also feels has been evidenced in its success. Today, the family study room stands as a site of joy; its creation and sustenance a tribute to the women who sought happiness and creativity in their “everyday mundane responsibilities” (Ganon et al., 2014).

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Caregiver:** Person who regularly provides full or partial care of a dependent.

**Family Kit:** Children's backpack filled with books and toys that could be checked out and used anywhere in the library.

**Family Study Room:** Group study room reserved for use by caregivers and children.

**Joy:** Positive affect with the potential to transform, revive, and rejuvenate.

**Lactation Room:** Dedicated space where a mother can nurse or pump breast milk.

**Positionality:** The idea that a person's position, or relationship, with a topic or a community is impacted by their social identities, values, and experiences.

***Kids in the Library*****APPENDIX****UMD Libraries Family Study Room Policies**

- This room is for the use of University of Maryland students, faculty, and staff with children aged 12 or younger.
- Maximum occupancy is two families or six people.
- The room may be reserved online for up to two hours at a time. Renewals are permissible as long as others have not reserved the room.
- The room is not soundproof. Please remind children to use soft voices. Devices should be used with headphones only.
- There are no filters on Libraries' computers, so controversial materials are not screened out.
- Users should leave the room clean and orderly.
- Do not remove toys or books from the Family Study Room.
- Please inform Libraries staff immediately if there are problems with the room.
- Parents/guardians are solely responsible for their children's safety and behavior. Children may not be left unattended in the Family Study Room. Unattended children under the age of 8 anywhere in the Libraries will be reported to the University Police.
- Failure to follow the Family Study Room rules may result in the loss of room privileges.