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## **Grant funds weekly parent-child play sessions**

By RACHEL COLEMAN

### Leader & Times

Child's play is serious business — at least for the Liberal Area Coalition for Families.

Now, parents and children can learn and play together with other families, thanks to a grant received by the Liberal Area Coalition for Families and First Baptist Church. Starting in February, mothers of young children have a helping hand, and a lot more fun.

Learn and Play sessions for children age five and younger will occur twice monthly, Friday mornings, at the church located at 204 N. Sherman Ave.

“We’ll hold the playgroups in the church, where the west parking lot entrance leads to the

basement area,” said Sarah Foreman of the LACF. “They’ve been very generous and let us use the space for free.”

The 10 a.m. play group will feature Creative Curriculum materials to lead parents and children in guided play interactions.

“We’ll have six centers set up, with crafts, snacks, sensory play, fine and gross motor skills. It will follow a plan, but not in a rigid sense,” said Foreman. “The underlying benefit is that these are focused on developmental benchmarks, and allow parents to get a sense of how the child is doing with social and emotional skills, as well as physical skills.”

Foreman said that she and co-facilitator Denisse Ramos will offer screening sessions if parents feel there are any “red flags” that show up in play time. However, she emphasized that the Learn and Play initiative is meant to be a low-key way for mothers and children to enjoy social time with educational benefits.

“I think it will provide a couple hours a month of that social interaction, if a mom is a stay-at-home mom, that will give her time with other moms, and a brief time of social interaction for kids,” Foreman said. While the twice-monthly sessions aren’t meant to substitute for preschool, they will “at least get kids used to being around other kids, very loosely following a small routine — ‘now we do this,’” said Foreman.

In terms of helping stay-at-home mothers build a structure of interaction for their children, Foreman said, the LACF worked to provide Learn and Play as something more, not a substitute for existing programs. For example, the popular MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) program also meets on Friday mornings, generally the second and fourth of the month; Learn and Play occurs on alternate weeks, meeting on first and third Fridays.

“We’ve scheduled a total of 20 sessions between February and November, and most of them do not overlap with MOPS,” Foreman said. The exceptions show up in months when a holiday falls on a Friday.

As for mothers who work outside the home, Foreman hasn't forgotten the challenges of balancing family and professional schedules.

"I don't want to discourage moms who work from attending Learn and Play," she said. "So if there's enough interest, we will start one in the evening. We will definitely look into getting that started."

For now, LACF will take registrations for the Friday morning group. Learn and Play is provided at no cost to the participants, and each week, small "door prize" incentives will be given away.

"They're little things, and most of them are meant to support literacy. We might give away a set of finger puppets or some children's books, and once in a while, gift cards or incentives from businesses in town," Foreman said. "I always like the opportunity to increase my own children's library here at home."

Everyone who registers will receive a Learn and Play T-shirt.

With the first session right around the corner, Foreman urged parents to sign up sooner rather than later.

"If they want more information, they can call the coalition number, 655-7177," she said. A Registration session is set for Friday, Jan. 24 at Spencer Brown's coffee shop.

"Because this is funded by a grant from the Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund, we need to fill out a few forms, but we'll be serving cookies and cocoa for kids and their parents who are signing up," said Foreman.

Foreman, herself the mother of young children, is excited to get Learn and Play up and running.

“There are 29 funded sites in Southwest Kansas, and when I saw the map and realized Liberal and Seward County was the only location that didn’t have one, I wanted to correct that as soon as possible,” she said. “I think this will be a valuable resource for families in the community.”

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