PAGE+ MORIS

Atherton Library Focus Group: Parents
Monday, May 9, 2011
Kathy Page facilitated the discussion and Clarice Zusky recorded.
Six mothers and one nanny participated while their children attended a program in the Library.

1.   Introductions / Project Explanation

Kathy explained the purpose of the meeting and the current status of planning for the new Library and then attendees introduced themselves and noted their kids' ages, which were: 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 14 and 17.

2.   Library Use Patterns

Most attendees also visit libraries in Woodside and Menlo Park, to attend children's programs there as well as the programs offered at the Atherton Library. They spoke highly of Maeve, the Atherton children's librarian, and the successful events she organizes. One or two parents also visit the Palo Alto Library (both Children's and Main), one also uses Redwood City and several like the San Carlos book exchange.

Which services used? Check out children's books and media, attend programs for kids, use the Atherton garden. Participants were quite enthusiastic about Atherton's garden and the exterior landscaped areas generally – very successful place for children to let off steam. One mom said she visits the Palo Alto and Menlo Park libraries to find books for herself and her husband.

3.   Strengths / positive features of current Atherton Library?

- the garden – more discussion of this feature and how positive it is. Several would like the new library to offer indoor/outdoor space
- scale of library—how intimate it is
- casual, can bring snacks in
- this flexibility is needed for kids
- it is a controlled environment because of the small size
- area in the front (lawn area) —they can stay for hours, love it
- take advantage of the whole space—inside and outside
- historic sense of the building
- book exchange/ice cream social

4.   Weaknesses / features you would change? What would draw you and your family to the new library? (the discussion quickly shifted from negatives to ideas of what they would like)

- no electrical outlets outside for laptop users
- lack of acoustical separation between children's and adult spaces

Would like to see:

- natural lighting
- historic ambiance of current building retained
- hometown/small, cozy feel of the current Atherton Library
- a separate children's room but retain the ability to look in to children's from the adult space – need acoustic separation as well as visual connection
- within children's area: bean bags, other low seating for parents and children to sit together and read
- new books – "we've gone through about everything here"
- more space for more books/variety
- more casual groupings of books—browsing collection for adults and children – it's not necessary for kids' books to be shelved exactly in order. Picture books especially could be in rough categories in bins so kids can look at them and put them back without disturbing anything
- more puzzles for kids – Atherton now has just 5 (and we have played with them all)
- a small puppet theater the kids could play with – have seen elsewhere and it was popular
- DVDs and music CDs that kids can watch and listen to
- fish tank/live animals (science related exhibit) that changes over time – similar to the white rats Maeve brought in the day of the meeting
- display board—kid's notice board – so kids' art can be posted at kid viewing height
- create a kids' space that is more kid-centric
- art display space, including displays of work by school classes
- continue to have excellent children's library and programs
- make sure there is a community feel
- space for parents to interact (bringing kids to the library also provides a sort of support group venue for new parents)
- hot chocolate machine (refreshments would be nice)
- a colorful color scheme – kid-focused, not institutional
- sustainable, green

All but one participant were not interested in computers for kids due to the ubiquitous availability of computers in their lives and because computers tend to capture their attention when the reason for their visit to the library is to explore books and enjoy programs. Once they see the computers, it is hard to get them interested in other things.

Kathy asked if switching to laptops would help. Attendees did not know but were willing to consider. They also mentioned the Tumblebooks software as a computer based reading program that does for them. There was also interest in access to free music downloading, which one person had encountered at another library = Freegal service. They also asked for a previewing station to be able to check out music and video programs before taking them home as well as organizing the media by age suitability (e.g., these are good for kids 2 – 4).

5.   Describe the ideal space for children and families?

Programming space should not be not isolated or enclosed, but associated with the children's space. Participants mentioned the Menlo Park Library's basement

programming room as an example of what not to have: too small, crowded, in the basement, no windows, cut off from the rest of the library.
floor to ceiling windows
reading nooks, little spots for little people to curl up and read

6.   Other libraries to use as a model?

- Children's library in Palo Alto – historic, beautiful
- Woodside library story times
- Redwood City Downtown Library - program area on 3rd floor is large, light-filled, plenty of space, parents sit on chairs at back of room

7.   Any other comments?

- libraries are great place to visit when we travel because they are always kid friendly
- provide a separate area for computers - a "computer space"
- provide separation between children's area and adults
- consider the design values at the U-Me indoor playground in redwood City – offers a really good café, is an alternative play space for kids, families pay monthly fee to use
- have a great programming space
- invite children's book authors to come and read their stories at programs (from one participant's daughter after the meeting)