

Hudson's Willis House unveils renovated playroom for kids



Justice, who lives at the Willis House, plays with a slinkie in the new playroom. Daily News Staff Photo/Brad Avery

By **Brad Avery**

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HUDSON - In the Willis House, it can be hard for children to find ways to pass the time. But on Wednesday, the kids of the 14-family homeless shelter rushed into a brand new second-floor playroom to dig into the toys and games they'll now have to play with whenever they would like. According to Janice D'Amico, program manager at Willis House, the shelter works with families to get parents back into the workforce and eventually permanent homes. The new playroom is open all day and gives parents an opportunity to spend time with their children. Formerly an unfinished storage space for toys, the renovated playroom is warm, welcoming and features books, dolls and all sorts of interactive games.

"We help families to get back on their feet," D'Amico said. "We help them and their children to find the stability they need."

The room came courtesy of the Bright Horizons Foundation for Children, which coordinated several branches including Bright Horizons of Sudbury, Wayland, Wellesley, Natick and Boxborough as well as Staples and Boston Scientific to raise money and other donations. According to Bright Horizons regional manager Jaqueline Keabajian, the groups ran art auctions, bake sales and farmers markets to raise \$7,000 for the new playroom.

However, the final room only cost \$5,000, thanks to donated labor from contractor Craig Suppa and painter Craig Hopkins. The extra money is going toward revamping a computer room to include an additional play space, so parents can keep an eye on their kids while they search for jobs online, Keabajian said.

"We try to open up spaces where children really get the chance to engage and enjoy the space," Keabajian said. "The main goal was to ensure that the families who are here have the opportunity to do one-on-one, educationally sound activities with their children."

The renovations included tearing up the floor and putting down new boards, adding a new radiator cover and a fresh paint job. Bright Horizons will also make monthly visits to restock the room, replacing any toys that become too worn out or broken.

After a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Wednesday, children wasted no time tossing around the assorted blocks, dinosaurs and Slinkies.

"It's hard here, you have to share things," said Willis House resident Yinna Encarnacion of the new room. "Sometimes you really need a break and it will feel good for a couple hours."

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