

# QUIET PLAY SPACES



November  
2018

## St Gregory's Parish Queanbeyan

Here at St Raphael's Church there are Quiet Play Spaces for little children and their parents and baby change facilities in the unisex disabled toilet. This an initiative of the Parish Pastoral Council.

### **Report to the Queanbeyan Parish Pastoral Council**

By Margaret Carmody

# Quiet Play Spaces

## ST GREGORY'S PARISH QUEANBEYAN

### INTRODUCTION

#### Background

St Raphael's church Queanbeyan is a very large, formal church built in the Florentine style in the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> There are two alcoves on the north and south side walls of the church, each is approximately 3 metres wide by 1.5 metres deep. The alcoves have tiled floors and stained-glass windows. There is a large artwork of an unknown saint on the wall of the south alcove. The alcoves were originally confessionals but since the partitions were removed, they have served as "discretionary spaces" in the church, that is spaces where reading materials, information and booklets have been displayed. Quite a few of the racks were empty because these days people get most of their information from the net, rather than printed materials. There was a cold-water dispenser located in the north alcove. They were by default the space where mobility aids such as walking frames or strollers were parked by parishioners.



Figure 1 St Raphael's Church Lowe St Queanbeyan NSW

When babies and small children became restless during Mass, parents often walked up and down the aisles with them, trying to distract and settle them. Often, they would end up in the small alcoves on the side walls of the church and there the child would seem a little more settled. But the items in the alcoves were of no interest to the child and there was nowhere for the parent to sit, so inevitably, the parent would start their pacing back and forth again and quite possibly decide to leave and go home. And quite possibly never return.

It seemed that the children had identified in these unassuming alcoves, the perfect "Quiet Play Spaces".

The idea of Quiet Play Spaces in the church was first raised at a QPPC meeting in October 2017 by Margaret Carmody and further discussed at a follow up meeting with the Parish Priest, Fr Troy Bobbin. The plan that emerged was an overall strategy to make the church "Family Friendly". The Quiet Play Spaces would be part of that strategy, along with baby change facilities in the unisex disabled toilet. Fr Troy suggested that in addition to the side alcoves, creating a small space at the front of the church in Our Lady's

<sup>1</sup> ST GREGORY'S PARISH QUEANBEYAN. 2018. *Saint Gregory's Catholic Parish* [Online]. Queanbeyan NSW. Available: <https://www.stgregsqueanbeyan.com/> [Accessed].

## Quiet Play Spaces

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Chapel, particularly to welcome families who come for Baptism presentations and often have toddlers and preschoolers.

The Quiet Play Spaces initiative was specifically for babies, toddlers and preschoolers and their parents. It was seen as an adjunct to the existing Little Sparks program for school-aged children.

## Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to report to the Queanbeyan Parish Pastoral Council on the establishment and use of the Quiet Play Spaces at St Raphael's Church during 2018.

## RESOURCES

There is a growing interest in improving the accessibility of churches especially the inclusivity of children.<sup>2</sup> This has resulted in the spread of the concept of Quiet Play Spaces within churches specifically for very young children and their parents, so they can relax while still attending Mass. The theoretical base for the Quiet Play Spaces is Maria Montessori's ideas about play for very young children.<sup>3</sup> Montessori was an Italian doctor and early childhood educator in the early twentieth century. She was a pioneer in the field of early childhood education and remains a major influence. She believed that children learn best in a prepared environment – prepared especially for them. The spaces need to be quiet, safe, engaging, and nurturing. The spaces should be a home-like environment, they should foster a sense of belonging and trust in their world. They should foster the development of social and language skills and opportunities to gain independence. The children's activities are set out to entice the child to get involved. They can work independently or with their parent or in small groups.

Based on Montessori's ideas, in a Quiet Play Space there should be: child sized furniture plus adult chairs nearby; there should be a comfortable rug on the floor and cushions; the toys should be made from natural materials such as wood, wool and so on, the toys should be clearly set out on shelves so a child can select one, play with it and then put it back; the books should be well written; there should be good quality artworks; there should be crayons and paper; a noticeboard for the children to display their work.

## ACTIVITIES

Fr Troy authorised Margaret to source the necessary furniture and equipment. See Appendix A.

Margaret purchased the items, made the bunting and assembled the furniture. They were installed in the two alcoves and at the front of the church in early March 2018.

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<sup>2</sup> MALNICK, E. 2014. Put up with noisy children in church, Catholic Church tells priests. *The Telegraph*.

<sup>3</sup> AUSTRALIA, M. 2018. *Biography of Dr. Maria Montessori* [Online]. Five Dock NSW: Montessori Australia. Available: <https://montessori.org.au/biography-dr-maria-montessori> [Accessed].

Each alcove at the sides of the church was furnished with a floor rug; a white painted wooden kindergarten table and two chairs; two floor cushions; two upholstered chairs for parents; a small timber-finish shelving unit in a similar colour to the church furniture; 2 metres bunting made of natural fabrics in the colours of the stained glass windows; good quality children's picture books and board books; soft toys such as hand knitted dolls, teddies and bunnies; small toys such as wooden cars; wooden puzzles; a small notice board with pins on the wall; supply of small good quality crayons in a tub on each table, white A4 paper for drawings.



Figure 2 Quiet Play Space in alcove on southern side of church

The area at the front of the church has a small patchwork rug in brocade fabrics on the floor and a cane basket filled with soft toys, small wooden toys, wooden puzzles and books.



Figure 3 Quiet Play space at the front of the church

## FINDINGS

Children and their parents immediately started using the Quiet Play Spaces. Particularly at the Sunday morning Masses, up to 12 small children and their parents have been observed using the spaces most weeks. At the Saturday and Sunday evening Masses, there are usually 2 – 4 children and their parents using the areas.

## Quiet Play Spaces

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There is very high interest in and use of the two alcoves and also the space at the front of the church. Taking into consideration the children and their parents this represents approximately 50 people which is close to 10% of the weekly total congregation.

After about three months, it was observed that children had placed some toys in the rear of the church, so it was decided to set up another small Quiet Play Space at the rear of the church, behind the choir. This is similar to the set up at the front of the church, namely a small floor rug and a cane basket of toys and books and two floor cushions and a couple of chairs for parents.

The children play quietly. When there is noise it is likely to be laughter of children playing together, not distressed children who are wanting to leave Mass. They particularly enjoy sitting at the small tables and doing drawings and then pinning their drawings on the small noticeboards in the two alcoves.

The short lengths of bunting made from natural fabrics and colours reflecting the artworks make the areas seem smaller, cosier and more secure which is significant in such a large church.

The children talk about and like the brightly coloured stained glass windows and the artworks in the alcoves.

The spaces are comfortable for the children and their parents. The furniture is the correct size for very young children, smaller than school furniture. The parents sit on the chairs or in the adjacent pews or on the cushions on the floor.

The children make their own choice, they select a toy or a puzzle from the shelves, play with it by themselves or with others in a small group. They have the freedom to work on their choice of activity. They work for as long as they like on a particular puzzle or picture. When they have finished, they usually carefully pack the toy up and replace it on the shelf. Sometimes the parents help a child to select a book and they take it back to where they are sitting in the church and read it together.

The area at the front of the church is particularly used by families presenting a child for Baptism who are attending the Saturday evening Mass.

It could be argued that the Quiet Play Spaces are building the community of the parish. The children are making friends, playing in mixed age range groups of children of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The parents are not playing the role of teachers. They are rather facilitating their child's learning, encouraging them to follow their own interests. The parents are getting to know each other and once the children are settled playing, the parents are able to give most of their attention to Mass.

## DISCUSSION

The people greeting at the door, particularly Deacon Chris Van Gessel have been suggesting to young families that they might like to sit near the Quiet Play Spaces: this has created interest in the idea. There have been notices placed in the Parish Bulletin explaining the Quiet Play Spaces, emphasizing that parents must stay close to their children.<sup>4</sup> See Appendix C.

The drawings done by the children are of particular interest. Some are by very small children of about one year of age and they typically have circles drawn in several colours. They have been done with great energy

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<sup>4</sup> 2018. St Greg's is Family Friendly. *St Gregory's Parish Bulletin*, 3.

and pride. Next there are pictures which are more representational such as rainbows or flowers or patterns, often with the child's name and perhaps a single word such as "love". Lastly there are pictures done by preschoolers some of which are prayers with illustrations. The children take great pride in pinning up their pictures.

At first some colouring sheets were also supplied, however, it was quickly apparent that the children found colouring sheets less interesting than blank paper where they could create their own drawings. They tended to use only one colour on the colouring sheets and scribble over them and often tore them up. At times, people have left colouring pencils or pens, however, these have been removed because crayons are much more suitable for very small children: they can easily hold them and they cannot use them as weapons and if someone happens to write on a wall, the crayon mark is easily removed and does not damage the wall. In addition, crayons do not need to be sharpened. When they break in small pieces, they can be replaced.

An orderly environment is important feature of the Quiet Play Spaces. Generally, the parents make sure that the children return the toys to their places and put the books back on the racks. Sometimes, parents understandably leave in haste, and the area is left untidy, but this is unusual. There is a sign advising parents about using the areas. See Appendix B. The areas need a quick tidy about once a fortnight. The pictures need to be removed from the noticeboards, leaving one or two as examples, so there is room for more. The toys may need to be set out on the shelves so the children can easily see them. There may be some lost property that needs to be removed. Sometimes the toys and the crayons turn up in other places in the church. The consumables, the crayons and white A4 paper need to be constantly replenished. These are kept in the cupboard in the south alcove.

### **Positive reactions**

Parents have remarked about how pleasant the areas are. They have said they are impressed with the areas and said how much easier it is to attend Mass with their children. Parents have described the Quiet Play Space as a "lifesaver". The children have been enthusiastic about displaying their drawings on the notice boards and take great interest in the puzzles and books. They seem to enjoy making friends with other children.

## **Concerns**

### **Not so quiet play**

It is observable that whereas in the past it was common to hear children crying in Mass, that has been replaced by the sound of children laughing and playing with puzzles. A small number of parishioners have mentioned that they find the children distracting during Mass, particularly when they play with puzzles or talk to each other. The staff in the Parish Office have explained the ideas of the Quiet Play Spaces to these people and the benefits to the children and their families. There are signs reminding parents that the children need to play quietly. The areas are specifically designed to reduce noise with the use of thick floor rugs and cushions. The toys are deliberately chosen to be low noise. For instance, there is no Duplo or blocks or construction toys that make noises.

### **For those desiring more freedom of activity**

Consideration could be given to developing the garden on the south side of the church so that parents could take a restless child outside for a short break in suitable weather. The current garden is over grown and does not have much attraction for children. It would be difficult to supervise a toddler running around out there as

## Quiet Play Spaces

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there is not good visibility of the area due to large plantings in the flower boxes. There is plenty of seating and paving but no shelter or shade. For the garden to serve the purpose of a place for parents and small children it would need some shade and attractive plants such as flowers and herbs that children would find interesting. It might also be worth considering installing a pool style fence with a gate across from the church to the Parish Office. This would create a safe area for small children at social events and morning teas and groups such as playgroups. It could be a community project for 2019 with parishioners donating plants from their own gardens.

### Child safety

Child safety is a major consideration and to this end parents are reminded in signs on the walls and in the Parish Bulletin to supervise their children closely. The toys are regularly checked for damage and replaced as needed.

### Accessibility

The folding change table located in the unisex disabled toilet outside the church is convenient for parents to use. Because it can be folded, it does not impose on the space needed for wheelchair access. There is a sign on the wall near the door on the northern side of the church advising parents that there are baby change facilities.

Initially there was a cold-water dispenser located in one of the alcoves. This has been relocated in the church to make more space for the children to play and give better access to the water for members of the congregation.

Space was made along the walls of the church for the mobility aids that parishioners had formerly parked in the alcoves. The parishioners were approached personally by Fr Troy and they were uniformly agreeable to the new arrangements.

The large display shelving was relocated from the north alcove to the rear of the church. The existing racks on the walls were used for the children's books.

### Costs

The cost of setting up the Quiet Play Spaces was minimal due to sourcing most of the items from charity shops. The bunting was sewn at home. The parents' chairs were provided by the school. The only items purchased new were the floor rugs and the small chairs.

There are ongoing costs: crayons, paper and replacement of toys. To date this cost has been \$15.00.

### The future

Consideration could be given to creating Quiet Play Spaces in St Gregory's Church in Molonglo Street Queanbeyan and the other churches in the Northern Mission, located at Bungendore, Michelago and Braidwood.

A possible extension of the community of young families using the Quiet Play Spaces could be a playgroup that meets in the Parish Centre. This would need careful thought and a volunteer leader with expertise in early childhood.

Extension of the Family Friendly ethos would be to consider other groups in the Parish such as the elderly and their carers and how best to include them in the Parish Life.

## CONCLUSION

The Quiet Play Spaces which are part of the Family Friendly initiative at St Gregory's Parish have made St Raphael's church seem very welcoming to families with young children. The continued popularity of the spaces and the positive feedback from parents along with the community building aspects of the children playing together make this low-cost initiative very successful.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

This report recommends that the Quiet Play Spaces be continued with the following considerations:

1. Weekly or fortnightly maintenance including tidying toys, replenishing the consumables and removal of excess drawings. Perhaps this could be a task by a volunteer or by the staff in the Parish Office.
2. Every three months, check all the toys and books and replace any that are damaged.
3. Funding for consumables and replacement toys and books. This is estimated to be \$20.00 per annum. Perhaps there could be a morning tea each year to raise this money. A volunteer could be responsible for selecting replacement toys and books. These would need to be in keeping with the Montessori ideas about quality literature and natural materials for toys.
4. Renovate the south garden with new colourful plants and some shelter and a childproof fence.
5. Consider establishing a playgroup in the Parish for the families with very young children as an extension of the community building of the Quiet Play Spaces.

APPENDICES

Appendix A List of materials purchased

Quiet play spaces for St Raphael’s church

Books on display, toys on shelves, crayons and colouring sheets, child size furniture, noticeboard for children’s work, rug on floor, cushions, bunting to make it seem cosy. Seats for 2 adults. Folding baby change table.

TWO SIDE ALCOVES AND AREA AT FRONT OF CHURCH – OUR LADY’S CHAPEL			
Item	Pic	Source	Cost \$
<b>For the two side alcoves</b>			
2 small tables & 8 chairs		Salvos	10.00
4 small chairs		Ikea	100.00
4 adult chairs		School	0
2 noticeboards @ \$5 ea		Salvos	10.00
2 small shelf units for crayons, toys, puzzles		Salvos	30.00
Bunting natural fabrics in colours to reflect artworks		MC	0
<b>For front space</b>			
Cane toy basket		Salvos	7.00
Floor quilt		Salvos	10.00
<b>To be shared among the 3 spaces</b>			
40 Books		Vinnies	11.25
6 wooden puzzles		Vinnies	8.00

8 toys and 9 teddies			Vinnies	14.50
4 floor cushions @ \$3 ea			Vinnies	12.00
<b>Baby change facilities</b>				
1 folding baby change table			Salvos	10.00
<b>Subtotal</b>				<b>\$212.75</b>
2 Floor rugs @ \$45 ea			Kmart	90.00
<b>Total</b>				<b>\$312.75</b>

## Appendix B Notice in Quiet Play Spaces

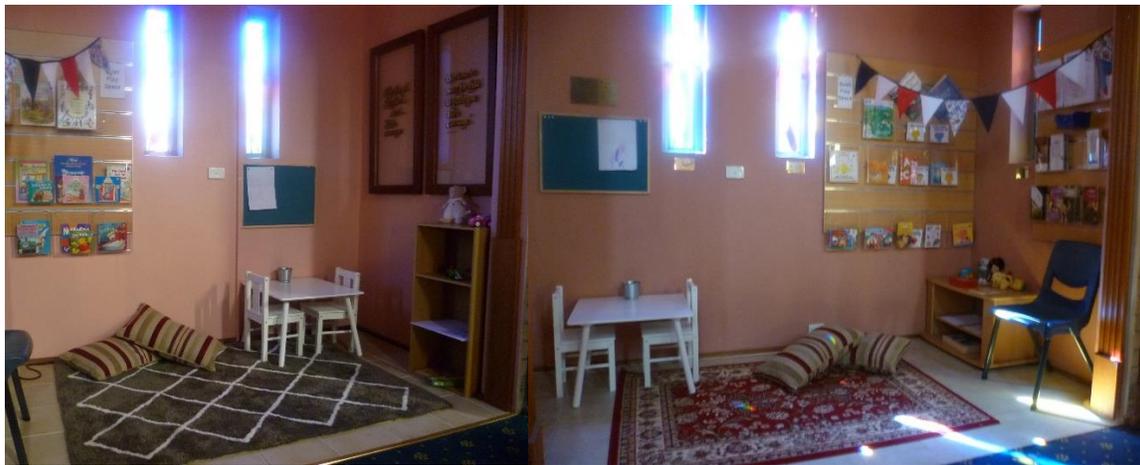
### ST GREG'S PARISH IS FAMILY FRIENDLY



Here at St Raphael's Church you will find Quiet Play Spaces for little children and their parents and baby change facilities in the unisex disabled toilet. This an initiative of the Parish Pastoral Council.

The Quiet Play Spaces in the church have small toys, soft toys, puzzles and loads of picture books, along with colouring sheets, paper and crayons. The Quiet Play Spaces are for babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers and their parents to relax quietly during Mass. There are rugs and cushions on the floor, small tables and chairs for the children and chairs for the parents. And most of all there is a notice board where the children can pin up their pictures or prayers.

Please stay close to your children and supervise them so they enjoy the Quiet Play Spaces and then leave the spaces as you find them.



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## Appendix C Notice in Parish Bulletin

### **St Greg's is Family Friendly**

Here at St Raphael's Church you will find Quiet Play Spaces for little children and their parents and baby change facilities in the unisex disabled toilet. This an initiative of the Parish Pastoral Council. The Quiet Play Spaces in the church have small toys, soft toys, puzzles and loads of picture books, along with colouring sheets, paper and crayons. The Quiet Play Spaces are for babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers and their parents to relax quietly during Mass. There are rugs and cushions on the floor, small tables and chairs for the children and chairs for the parents. And most of all there is a notice board where the children can pin up their pictures or prayers. Please stay close to your children and supervise them so they enjoy the Quiet Play Spaces and then please leave the spaces as you find them.

Parish Bulletin 20 September 2018<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## REFERENCES

### References

2018. St Greg's is Family Friendly. *St Gregory's Parish Bulletin*, 3.
- AUSTRALIA, M. 2018. *Biography of Dr. Maria Montessori* [Online]. Five Dock NSW: Montessori Australia. Available: <https://montessori.org.au/biography-dr-maria-montessori> [Accessed].
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