

Community



MAKING IT AS HACKERMOMS

Creating space where women, young kids and imaginative effort coexist



Photos by Michael Macor / The Chronicle 2012

Above: Christianna Lenox (left) and Sheila Metcalf at work. **Below:** Holly Wach draws in pen and ink as her 18-month-old daughter, Morena Scetta, sticks close by.

By Ellen Lee

No one bats an eye one typical morning as toddlers run around, some in costume, in a small retail space in South Berkeley. A baby reclines in a bouncer and bats at toys. Another is nursing. Occasionally there is a cry for Mommy, a fight to break up over toys or a diaper to change.

Think “hackerspace” and the hubbub at HackerMoms may not be the first image that comes to mind. But with their young children often in tow, the women here are finding the time and space to tackle their creative endeavors, from sketching illustrations for a children’s book to building hanging sculptures with wires.

“I like the feel of it and being able to bring my kids here,” said Wendy Renz, who on another morning was at a sewing station, finishing a whale-shaped pillow with chevron stripes. “I like being around people who are busy making things.”

Motherhood HackerMoms opened its doors in April 2012, born out of a desire for a community and place where moms could feel comfortable taking on any sort of crafty, hands-on, do-it-yourself kind of project.

It joins a wave of hackerspaces that have launched in recent years, particularly in the technology-rich San Francisco Bay Area. Just as social media has encouraged sharing, collaborating and tin-

kering with new ideas online, so has it fueled a desire to share, collaborate and tinker in person. HackerMoms estimates that more than 1,000 hackerspaces exist today — San Francisco’s Noisebridge and nearby Ace Monster Toys in Oakland among them — but none, until now, that catered to women, particularly mothers with young children.

Here, unlike other spaces, it’s part of the normal routine to have little feet running around or a baby crawling while an artist sketches an idea for an illustration or a designer hunches over a sewing machine.

Split into two rooms, the 1,000-square-foot space is equipped for the hacker and parent alike. Members, who pay \$60 a month, can take advantage of three sewing

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Sho Sho Smith, HackerMoms co-founder

machines, including a Juki industrial sewing machine, a screen-printing machine and some power tools in the main room. There’s also a portable crib for naps, a diaper-changing pad and potty seat in the bathroom, and a safety gate made from upcycled wood pallets to keep young explorers from running outside.

The adjoining room is a soundproofed indoor play space. Kids, who generally range from under a year old to



elementary school age, can swing in a hammock, go down a toddler slide, pretend to cook, and dress up as princesses and superheroes. The group hires babysitters to keep an eye on the children, giving the mothers some breathing space to focus on their projects.

The main room showcases the fruits of some of their efforts. The first few pages of a screenplay have been tacked on a bulletin board. Oil and acrylic paintings, framed pen and ink illustrations, and knit hats hang on the walls.

“Women here are creative people first,” said Sho Sho Smith, co-founder of HackerMoms. All the while, “kids are exposed to women doing things. The creative life is not a separate life.”

The more than 25 women who have joined as full members said it fills a hole for them, whether it’s the isolation that can come with motherhood or a desire to find

like-minded creative people.

“I have mom friends who I love and artists who I love, but not many moms who do creative work,” said Aya de Leon, director of UC Berkeley’s Poetry for the People.

HackerMoms started in 2011 as a sort of alternative moms’ group. About 10 women started meeting at each other’s homes and experimenting with arts and crafts. They hired a sitter to help entertain their kids.

“We didn’t want to talk about diaper changing and nap schedules,” said Karen Agresti, one of the group’s founding moms. “We wanted to make things and get crafty and get our hands dirty.”

In December 2011, the moms started raising money and pooling their resources to rent and furnish a retail space on the border of Oakland and Berkeley. A Kickstarter campaign in the fall raised more than \$12,000, which they plan to use to purchase additional tools and start a kids’ program

To find out more: <http://motherhip.hackermoms.org>.

and business incubator. The Kickstarter campaign also drew a lot of attention, though not all of it positive. Some women without children, fathers and men complained that the space seemed to exclude them. HackerMoms, which hosts open houses for the public, responded that they are welcome, but that the space is aimed at addressing the unique needs that mothers face.

Members have keys that allow them to come and go as needed. The nonprofit has also held workshops, including brushing up on computer programming, designing LED-powered clothing and understanding sleep for children.

A group of dedicated moms also formed a “failure club,” with the motto “Fail fast, start again.” For three months, with goals such as “Write, illustrate and self-publish a children’s book about poop,” they met weekly to report their progress and support each other’s efforts.

On the last day of the failure club’s session, Shannon Nicholls, a professional photographer, shared how she had begun to write the first three chapters of a memoir. Though it was daunting at first, she said, she was glad she had started to try.

“I’m excited that I failed,” she said as she nursed her 8-month-old son. “I’m just getting started.”

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Top left: Jen Tol (left), with her son, Griffin Garcia (behind her) smiles at Noah Gonze, 2, with creative caretaker Toni Mikulka. **Top center:** Erin Althea puts pen to paper.

Top right: Shannon Nicholls creates while 7-month-old Bevin plays close by.