



# California Libraries

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## A Storybook Time for the New Rohnert Park-Cotati Regional Library

In our adult's world, children are often expected to function in spaces sized for people old enough to vote and tall enough to get dishes out of the cupboard. But given a place truly designed with them in mind, kids flourish. Case in point: the new Rohnert Park-Cotati Regional Library, designed by Noll & Tam Architects, where the children's area and reading garden were designed for pint-sized patrons, and kids love it so much they don't want to leave and can't wait to come back.



Entrance of New Library

With California schools chronically underfunded, libraries have become even more important in community life—a place where children can further learn and explore, participate in activities, and have access to technologies that schools cannot always offer. In that light, the new Rohnert Park Library's offerings for children take on even greater importance.

In describing a library's ideal children's area, Patti Lewis, children's services coordinator for the Sonoma County Libraries, says, "The kids range in age from babies up through 12 years old, so the materials have to serve that diverse age range. The environment should be playful and comfortable, and yet everything should be easily accessible."

The children's area at the Rohnert Park Library meets, and even exceeds, all those criteria. As soon as the kids walk in, they can flop into lounge chairs and sofas sized just for them, or sit in a window seat and pore through their favorite books. The toddlers' reading area features a skylit dome with a vibrant mural depicting characters from children's literature. Computers sit on low tables painted a cheerful blue. Book carrels in the toddlers' area don't go any higher than an outstretched young arm. The furniture is sized to match kids according to their age.

"I've seen kids sit down in the small lounge chairs and say, 'See, it's just my size!'" says Branch Librarian Kathy Dennison proudly.

Outdoors, the Reading Garden supports the library's emphasis on reading and learning. The landscape design, by Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey, allegorically illustrates the role of libraries in fostering litera-



Mural Room

ture, language, and learning in human history. Drawing upon the universality of languages and sound that underlies human communication, the design uses various elements and events to create a garden for play, reading, and reflection.

Not in the children's area but very much affecting the kids' experience in the library, the new program room is allowing for programming that simply wasn't possible in the previous cramped space.

"The kids' area is the place to go, but the program room is a real boon to our offerings at Rohnert Park," says Patti Lewis. "We can have theater, musicians, magicians, puppet shows, and not worry about people being crammed together like sardines as in the old library."

The architecture throughout the building delights adult patrons as well as the younger set. The large truss ceiling and light-filled main reading room create a generous sense of space, and for a more intimate experience, the informal seating area includes a fireplace. Nobody should want for a place to sit: the library offers seating for over 250, and the meeting room accommodates 120 for lectures and includes a catering kitchen.

Patti Lewis points out that attendance at the library is way up, and that circulation is up 45%. That puts more pressure on the book-buying budget, but it's a problem most libraries wouldn't mind facing.

And the kids, blissfully unaware of boring grownup topics like budgets, just know that they love coming to the new library. As Laurie Cameron, children's librarian for the Rohnert Park Library, said about opening day in June, "Most of the kids walked in and said a great big 'Wow!'"

Lauren Broder  
Noll & Tam Architect



Main Reading Room