

Sentinel & Enterprise

Play time at Cutie Patuties

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LEOMINSTER -- Despite dreary weather outside, the atmosphere was sunny inside the consignment store Cutie Patuties on Saturday, as children enjoyed the benefits of "unstructured play."

From noon to 4 p.m. on Saturday, the Leominster clothing and toy store hosted an event called "Let's Play," inviting children to play creatively with a variety of toys.

A large table in the center of the store, at 1021 Central St., was covered with trains, animal figures, dolls and dollhouses, puzzles, stuffed animals and coloring books.

"We're doing this event to help families remember the importance of unstructured play," said Cassandra Abramson, owner of Cutie Patuties.

Abramson said she got the idea from the nonprofit Toy Industry Association's movement "The Genius of Play," which touts the importance of children playing using their imaginations. "The old-fashioned way," Abramson said. "Giving kids time to be unplugged from electronics."

In addition to the various toys and games she had put out for children to play with, Abramson had a sign-up sheet for parents to pledge to give their children seven hours of unstructured play.

"I think it's a great idea," said Shirley resident Laura Mason, who brought her 6-year-old son and 7-year-old daughter to the store.

Mason said she already tries to emphasize more imaginative, unstructured play for her children.

"They have their screen time, but then we turn it off and say, 'OK, go figure out what you're doing,'" she said. "We pretty much let them go at it, and they entertain themselves very well." Fitchburg resident Yetti Lopez, a grandmother of five, said she is the same way with her grandchildren.

"When they come over to the house, I always say, 'no computer, no TV,'" she said. "They have a big room with a ton of toys."

Lopez signed the pledge, saying, "I think it's excellent."

As the afternoon came to an end, Abramson said she definitely wants to hold another ... event.

"We've had several families today that said, 'Thanks for doing this,'" she said. "And I have yet to have anybody standing here playing on their Gameboy."