Extreme Kids & Crew opened its first sensory play and art space dedicated to and inspired by children with disabilities in Brooklyn, New York in 2011. Over the years, parents from around the country have contacted me, asking for advice on setting up similar programs. Here, then is an overview of how Space No. 1, our first play space, came into being. If you find this of value, please consider contributing to Extreme Kids & Crew. Thanks to the generosity of our donors, and the enthusiasm of the families who come to play, we now operate two play spaces and third is on the way. Good luck with your project!

Warning

What you are about to embark upon will change your life. You will create a space that did not exist before. You will bring courage, hope, love and support to children with disabilities as well as their parents and siblings. You will help to reverse the isolation that afflicts families dealing with disability, transforming difference into a vehicle for togetherness, compassion, growth and joy. However, this will not happen over night. Double the amount of time that you think you will need, both setting up the project and getting it running. It will also cost money. If you don’t have the time and the money, join with people that do. Start asking all your friends, family members, neighbors, and colleagues who they know who might want to help. The more people collaborating from the outset, the more likely the project will take root.
Elements of the Toolkit

1. Starting a Company
2. The Space
3. Budget
4. Insurance
5. Staff
6. Outreach
7. Operations
8. Open Play: What It Is & Why It Works

Starting a Company

You may have shimmering idea in your mind about the play space you want to create. The first step is to take this giddy, beautiful vision and turn it into words and numbers that the IRS can decipher.

As I happen to be married to a lawyer, Extreme Kids & Crew started on a firm legal footing from the outset. This was immensely helpful. It is difficult to rent space and raise funds if your papers are not in order. So find yourself a good, pro bono lawyer.

The lawyer will help you incorporate, file the name of your organization with the state, procure a tax I.D. number, and help you apply to the IRS and your state government for 501 (c)(3) nonprofit status.

You can avoid the IRS’s 501(c)(3) application by partnering with an established nonprofit organization that will accept donations on your behalf, then distribute them to you. This is called a sponsorship. If you do not have good legal counsel, a sponsorship is a good option, as the IRS application is difficult and time consuming. However, if you have legal counsel, consider tackling the application right away as it will help you clarify your thinking about your mission, the people you want to serve, and the nuts and bolts of how you intend to run your program.

For example, my vision for Extreme Kids & Crew centered around the establishment of a beautiful, artistic space that would serve as a home away from home for families with children with disabilities and give rise to a community bound together by difference. But this is not legal language. Legally, you articulate the types of disabilities you aim to serve, you articulate the age of the children involved; you articulate how your programs and play space will be staffed, funded, marketed and so on.
Filling out all these forms led me to see that Extreme Kids & Crew could start operations even before we found our space. We could get the word out and bring families together through concerts and art workshops held anywhere. It also led me to see the importance of parent involvement. I had known, from a community building perspective, that I wanted parents and siblings to be an integral part of our program, but I soon saw that this would necessary financially, too. We could not afford to hire the sort of one-on-one staff necessary to aid and assist children with diverse disabilities. We needed parents and caretakers to be the one-on-ones.

The Space

Number one lesson: Be flexible. I had been hoping to find a spacious, intriguing, tall ceiled, wheelchair accessible, had good natural light, and strong ceiling beams from which we could hang swings. We got one of these three wishes. Space No. 1 was wheelchair accessible. For the rest, we learned to make do. We covered the fluorescents with filters to mitigate their effects, and we bought a C-stand from which to hang the swings.

Figure out what is MOST important to your organization. These are things that have been important for ours:

1) Access—wheelchair accessibility, accessibility to public transportation, accessibility to parking.
2) Big bathrooms. You will want a wheelchair accessible toilet and you may want space for changing diapers on full grown children.
3) Overflow. When Space No. 1 got too crowded, we could start art projects in the hallway outside. Our subsequent play spaces are next to outdoor playgrounds. You do not want too many children in your play space at the same time or conditions will go from veer from creative and exploratory to over-stimulated madness pretty quickly. They need a ready outlet.
4) A space-share with a school can be mutually beneficial. We give PS 15, our current partner, access to our sensory play space during the school days for therapy and special needs.

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class recreation. Afterschool and on the weekends, we open up the space to our larger community of families.

To furnish this space, I recommend equipment that can be used in multiple ways and is attractive to both children and adults. More is not better. Open space, given form by one or two intriguing structures is great. Keep room for the imagination.

Figure out ways that everyone, regardless of body type, can have access to everything. For instance, a portable foam ramp is fun to play with and can lead up to the ballpit. A child can be lifted from a wheelchair and placed on parent’s lap on a platform swing. For children who do not like the sensation of swinging or sinking into a ballpit, provide alternative environments. Investing in a quiet room with pillows and a burbling bubble tube is well worth it.

Our most popular and well used items:

1. Matts—we lined the floor and walls with carpeted cheerleader mats, which have a more pleasant texture than the flat vinyl, help with falls, and diminish sound.
2. Swings—you can buy a C stand if you cannot hang swings directly from the ceiling. A variety of swings are great—platform swings, tire swings, and cuddle swings are our most popular.
3. Ball pit (we love ours, but do consider that you will have to clean it. Kids do pee and loose things in it).
4. Foofs, the more the merrier. You can make your own if you can find a futon shop to give you foam scraps. Buy futon covers from them, then fill them with the scraps and you’ve got a foof. You can also buy them on line and spare yourself the hassle of stuffing enormous bags of foam scraps into a car. Foofs can be used for seating, cuddling and relaxing. They are also terrific building materials. Children love turning them into forts, caves, mountains. They are great to jump off of and onto.
5. A bubble tube calms and fascinates both children and adults.
6. Art table and floor space for art making. A ready supply of pastels, crayons, huge rolls of paper are particularly nice as children don’t usually get the chance to create art on a large scale at home.
Budget

To give an example of the sorts of the money it took to get Space No. 1 started, here is our first year’s expenses and revenue. Bear in mind that most of the people who worked on the project, including the director, were volunteers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2011 Expenditures</th>
<th>2011 Revenue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>program manager</td>
<td>special events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>art &amp; movement teachers</td>
<td>class tuition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grant writer</td>
<td>individual donations</td>
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<tr>
<td>fundraising</td>
<td>grants</td>
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<tr>
<td>rent for initial weekend space</td>
<td>membership</td>
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<tr>
<td>rent deposit</td>
<td>drop ins</td>
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<td>rent for Space No. 1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>insurance</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>legal and professional fees</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>marketing, brochures</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>office supplies</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>art supplies</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>furniture, lights, etc.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>petty cash</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gym equipment</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 49,194</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

Insurance

As long as parents or caregivers are on the premises, the insurance is not as expensive as you might fear. It will probably fall in the range of $4,000 a year. You should also get liability insurance for your board of directors. Have parents sign a waiver when they first visit, agreeing to take responsibility for the safety of their child/children. This helps legally and it also helps keep track of how many families have visited your facility.
Staff

In order to welcome new families, explain rules, have waivers signed, collect any fees or donations, you will need a responsible adult to mind the space during opening hours. As you grow, you may want to train volunteers to help play with the children. You will need a larger back office staff than you are probably thinking—you will want people to help with outreach, communications, bookkeeping, taxes, grantwriting, fundraising, programming.

Outreach

Extreme Kids & Crew started operations in 2011. 200 families participated in our programming that first year. By 2014, over 1,000 families had participated. But getting people to come in the beginning was hard. Parents with children with disabilities are often overwhelmed, and many of them can’t believe that a program could fit the peculiarities of their child. So don’t loose hope if you organize a beautiful concert and only two families show up. You have provided those two families with precious time together and sewn the seeds for more families to come. They will want your program to succeed. They will tell their friends. Word of mouth is the best way to overcome inertia and fear. Also, if you get the chance to attract media attention, go for it. It will help people find out about your program and it will help people with disabilities in general.

The tone of your outreach is also important. We worked hard on our design, writing and photographs to show prospective families that we were a parent-created place that understood in a personal way the trials, tribulations and joys of parenting a child with disabilities. We made it

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very clear that we were not a therapy center or school. We were a place to gather and celebrate our own people. Consequently we attracted parents who, on some level, had made peace with their child’s disability. The community that resulted is one of deep acceptance, humor, and stalwart support. The families who participate are your program. So create the right sort of outreach to bring them in. They, far more than the equipment and space, are what gives your project power.

**Operations**

Extreme Kids & Crew produces free family concerts and family art projects about once a month, we partner with teaching artists to offer arts and movement classes for children with disabilities, and we partner with museums and the parks department on off site programs. The core of our program, however, is Open Play. The following article describes how Open Play works and what I’ve learned from it over the years.
Extreme Kids & Crew’s Open Play: What It Is and Why It Works

The following narrative, adapted from my memoir, explains how Extreme Kids & Crew set up its first sensory play space and what I learned from operating it. It ends with an addendum: What Space No. 1 Taught Us.

Extreme Kids & Crew’s first sensory playspace, Space No. 1, was located in an unused classroom in the Coop School in Brooklyn. I had been hoping for a location in a charismatic old building with tall ceilings (good for hanging swings) and natural light. What I got was a 1970’s cinder block construction with ugly drop ceilings and rickety
fluorescents, but it had what we needed: it was wheelchair accessible, its bathroom was large enough to accommodate a massage table (so that parents could change diapers on 100 pound children), it had windows and two enormous closets that could be converted into alternative environments. Most importantly, it was feasible. No one else would rent to a start up non-profit serving children with disabilities.

We covered the fluorescent lights with blue filters to mitigate their potentially harmful effects (some epileptics are particularly sensitive to fluorescents), and we lined the floor and walls with carpeted gymnastic mats, which are softer and comfier that vinyl mats and feel good on your toes. In consultation with Huck Ho, an occupational therapist and the program director at the Smile Center,1 I selected equipment that would be intriguing and inviting to both parents and children, accessible to any sort of body, and safe. I didn’t want to replicate a typical indoor playspace. I wanted to create a transformative space that would get people of all ages and abilities moving and acting in ways that stretched them and puzzled them and made them happy.

We kept the main room as open as possible, an expanse of fuzzy mats upon which rolled an enormous 4’ diameter red ball. In one corner stood a 750-pound C-Stand from which we hung a large carpeted platform swing that parents and children could glide, swing, or spin on together, in whichever position was most comfortable for them, standing, sitting or lying down. The platform swing could easily be unhooked and replaced with a hammock swing, a cuddle swing, a moon swing, or a squishy tire swing,

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1 The Sensory Motor Integration Language Enrichment Center, an excellent sensory gym in Manhattan specializing in pediatric occupational, physical and speech therapy.

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so there was lots of variety and possibility. In the other corner stood a sturdy art table where children could draw, paint, collage, or eat their snack. A dozen colorful foofs (futon covers stuffed with foam scraps) lined the walls, waiting to be piled into mountains for climbing and jumping, or arranged into a circle, or turned into caves, or anything else the children dreamed up. We turned one closet into a ballpit room, the other into a cozy lounge, with lava lamps glowing from a high (inaccessible) shelf, a burbling bubble tube, and lots of pillows.

By November 2011, we were ready. Ready for what? Open Play. Up until this time, Extreme Kids had held concerts, parent-child music, clay, yoga and soccer classes, family art projects and parent meet ups. When enough people came, these events were wonderful, but enough people didn’t always come. I believe this was due to the particular strains that parents raising children with disabilities face. Among them and in no particular order: Exhaustion—children with neurological damage commonly sleep only three or four hours a night, which does not necessarily tire them out, but it does tire out their parents. Add this to a combination of school and therapy five days a week, and you can see why parents may not wish to commit to a ten week class that asks them and their children to be out of the house, dressed and ready to go at ten on a Saturday morning. Logistics—behavioral or physical disabilities can make public transportation traumatic or simply not possible. Money—parents raising children with disabilities are 20-25% poorer than parents of similar educational levels, the result of medical/therapeutic expenses and loss of income as parents take time off from work or quit their job entirely in order to care for their children. Depression—isolating conditions can lead to a hopelessness that saps energy and the wish to connect. Parents don’t
believe their child will be able to participate in a meaningful way in a class or event.

Why bother?

Open Play came about as a response to these conditions. The room was designed so that there would be something of interest to every child, whether it be tactile, vestibular, visual, aural. The idea was to give parents the tools to explore with their children at their own pace and style; they could do anything they wanted, provided that it was safe. A volunteer therapist might show parents particularly useful ways to use the swing or the ball pit or the squeeze machine, but there was no pressure to do these things in one particular way. Everything could be done in many ways. In terms of logistics, we could not, alas, provide transportation, but we could provide a large window of time in which to get to our space. Parents would not have to worry about reservations or advanced scheduling. They’d simply need to show up somewhere between 12 and 4, say, on a Sunday afternoon. They would not be bothered with the ten-page forms that they had to fill out dozens of times a year, whenever they went to a social service agency or hospital. They would not have to prove their child was disabled or what their salary was. If they could not afford the suggested donation of $10, they could pay what they could. The only thing that they would have to fill out was a waiver, saying that they would take responsibility for the safety of their child.

It worked. They came. Eighty people on our first day. Seventy families that first week. I wandered around in a haze of exhaustion and elation. A mother half submerged in the ballpit played catch with her daughter. A father spun on the platform swing, his son whooping in his lap. Parents sprawled on foofs, talking to each other. Children ran about laughing. In spite of our blue filters, Abby, a pig-tailed powerhouse

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of a five year old, had a seizure on opening day. But her mother was cheerful about it. Space No. 1, she later told me, was a great place to have a seizure. The other families, used to the unusual, did not overreact, magnifying the effects, and further stressing her and Abby. They saw that Abby was OK and continued to play. No big deal. A seizure, of course, can be a big deal. But when it’s not, why turn it into one?

As the months went by, and playing at Space No. 1, going to concerts there, and doing art projects there became part of my family’s weekly routine, I became more aware and appreciative of this “good place to have a seizure” atmosphere. The gear was important. Kids came for the gear. We had a little boy from Manhattan who took the C train once a week to sprawl for an hour in the ball pit like it was his own personal sauna. Almost all the kids (and many of the adults) loved the various swings, the squeeze machine, and bubble tube. But the atmosphere really made the place. I realized this when it started to slip away.

By the spring of 2012, a fair amount of families whose children did not have disabilities or special needs were coming to play. I had wanted “normal” families to come. I had wanted them to see how cool a place for kids with disabilities could be, and disperse some of those wisps of fear and pity that so often accompany difference. But instead of reverse inclusion, the normal families began outnumbering the families dealing with disability, more or less replicating what was going on outside at the playgrounds. Kids from normal families would run right into children with disabilities. Smack! Like not only attracts like, like sees like. In my early twenties, my knee gave out and I had to walk around Manhattan with a cane. To my great surprise, on almost every block I’d see another person with a cane. Where had all these cane walkers been
when both my legs worked? Similarly when I was pregnant, I noticed all the pregnant women. Siblings of children with disabilities saw disability. But so many of the children who did not have that kind of day-to-day familial experience with disability did not. They saw only the normal kids. They ran into, or ran around children with disabilities with barely a flicker of recognition.

These neuro-typical kids also tended to play king of the mountain more, fight more, and in general, maintain a robust struggle over dominion. It’s not that the special needs kids were enlightened angels. They were great at having temper tantrums, biting themselves and each other, flailing around in unconsolable misery, peeing in the ball pit. But their mayhem tended to be less about domination than that of the regular kids. This lack of pecking order is not necessarily a trait of all disabled kids, but it is common in kids on the autism spectrum, and the majority of the special needs kids who played at Space No. 1 were on the autism spectrum.

A neuro-typical child, or adult for that matter, when walking into a room, will without even thinking about it, assess who is in charge, and what his or her relationship is to this person. Does she want to dislodge the boy standing on the mountain of foofs and take his place? Does she want to align herself with him? Does she want to avoid him and his gang altogether and go quietly draw (some satirical cartoons of them) at the art table? A kid on the spectrum is less likely to notice these subtle waves of social power. More likely to pick up a ribbon from the floor and study the way it glistens, feel its smoothness on the skin, taste its texture. If he wants to climb up on the mountain of foofs, it’s probably because he is interested in the feeling of being so high, with the squishiness under his feet, than a desire to dislodge or align himself with its current
ruler. He is as oblivious of the current neuro-typical master as the current neuro-typical master is of him.

To ensure that disabled kids would always be visible and in charge of their own space, we changed the rules. Normal families were still allowed, but they needed to come with a family that had at least one special needs child. The idea was to maintain a good ratio of typical to atypical children. We didn’t want the kids with disabilities to be in the minority. And I for one wanted to feel more of that strung out, autistic feeling of inquiry and contentment-in-oneself. To be shut up in one’s world all alone can be terrible, but to be content in one’s world and able to share it is a lovely thing, and something that many of these children are particularly good at, given the right sort of environment.

I became fascinated by environment. On numerous occasions, when families visited the space for the first time, the mother would run ahead to pop her head in the door, study the space with flickering, nervous eyes, and explain to me that she had brought her son (it was almost always a son), and that he had a hard time with transitions and unfamiliar terrains, so she didn’t know if it would work. Said son would appear, accompanied by an aide or another parent, walk through the door, and just keep walking, often straight onto the matt, without taking off his shoes. I would have to gently scuttle after him, and ask to him to take them off, or just slip them off for him. He would sit on a foof, taking in his surroundings with curiosity and approval, for all the world at home. The mother, still by the door, would blink in confusion, unaccustomed to a simple entrance. What was going on? I didn’t know. But I loved it.

All children with disabilities were welcome at our space; we did not make a distinction between the radically disabled, people like my son Felix, and that large swath
of children, 15% of schoolchildren, deemed special needs. Some of these children are honors students, some have unaddressed learning disabilities and are failing. What ties them together is that their bodies and minds are particularly mismatched with methods of instruction that work for the majority. They are outsiders, but not so far outside that they are not expected to shape up and fit in. It is a hard zone to inhabit, for it is a tangled, complicated and lonely state of affairs to both fit in and not fit in, to feel pressure to be something that you are not. One of my most treasured notes came from the mother of one of these “disability-lite” children.

I just wanted to thank you for the wonderful time that [my son] and I had at Space No. 1 last Saturday. I hadn’t realized how much [my son] needed to be in an environment that allowed for and appreciated his idiosyncrasies until I saw what it was like for him to be free in a place that offered so much to him and didn’t judge him at all. I try hard not to judge him myself, but it’s odd having a child who can “pass” on some levels. I don’t realize, or hadn’t, how much time and energy I spend trying to get him to adapt and deal and control his very impulsive self. And he can do that a lot. He works very hard, all the time, to keep his impulses in check and to find a way to deal with the transitions that are foisted upon him all the time that feel so disruptive to him. But after two hours in your space I realized what unmitigated joy there was for him in being able to follow himself, uninterrupted, for that long and not worry about whether he was following the rules. He needed of course to be reminded from time to time to be safe with himself and with others, but the energy of acceptance in your space is truly like oxygen we didn’t even know we needed. And it became clear to me that [he] needs to have regular time like that in his life, especially if we’re going to expect him to stand still and focus in Karate or at school or whatever.

And it made me realize that I need to find ways to celebrate his difference as well— not that I haven’t - but it’s so easy with a child who is in a “regular” school, who is participating with neurologically typical kids in everything he does and hasn’t had any space to be with other kids who have challenges – it’s so easy to focus your energies on trying to help him deal so he can fit in. I was thrilled to be with him in a space where he wasn’t trying to fit into anything other than whatever he enjoyed about being there. He loved it and talks about it a lot since then... I think there’s some weird part of us as parents that sometimes tells us subconsciously that if we somehow only culti-
vate and encourage more “normal” behaviors that our children will be safer – which of course I know well from experience of my own upbringing is totally false and unhelpful. It was so refreshing and encouraging for me to be around you and the other parents and kids in such an atmosphere of delight and acceptance and complexity and yearning and all of it. Those kids woke me up.

Atmosphere. The feel in a room. The air you breathe. It’s a hard thing to write about, for it is so subjectively felt, and yet most all of us feel it. You walk into one room and you stand up taller. You walk into another and you hunch your shoulders protectively. You teach one class and jokes and analogies burble up without a thought. You teach the same class to a different group and your voice is wooden and your thoughts are numb. Bodies, the bodies of other people in a room, transmit an enormous amount of information that our minds barely register, yet our bodies react. Our spines stiffen. Our throats tighten. Or, if you happen to be me at Space No. 1, or its successors, your jaw loosens, you breathe deeper, you find it easy to get down on the floor and talk and babble to anyone and everyone, whether they can understand you or not.

For the two years that Extreme Kids & Crew operated out of Space No. 1, I volunteered almost every weekend and people would say things like, Oh my, you work so hard, how do you do it? But most of the time, it didn’t feel like work. It was fun. It gave me energy. What I began to realize is that the atmosphere that helped autistic kids walk easily into the room and also helped me. It was not just the kids who felt accepted, but me, too. I began to understand how rare this feeling was for all of us and I began to study how to foster it.
Addendum: What Space No. 1 Taught Us

As Extreme Kids & Crew grew and more staff and volunteers got involved, the need to understand how to cultivate and sustain this atmosphere also grew. We know that the key is providing a space and time where the energy and talents of each child can blossom, whether this talent is appreciating a ray of sun, or drawing out the plan of the world’s greatest rocket. As each child’s personality and abilities are different, there is no one way to do this, but in a flexible, low pressure and open space, children often find a way, sometimes independently, sometimes with the help of parents and aides.

Below are the basic principals that have been helpful:

• **All the equipment in our space can be used by parents and children.** Parents can jump in the ball pit and crawl into the starry tent along with their child. For families who use our space on a weekly basis, the layout is comfortingly well known, but the territory still changes, the atmosphere of the room shifting with the number and variety of the people in it, offering up new opportunities and challenges.

• **We avoid children’s icons like Big Bird or Snow White.** We love Sesame Street, but we want to create an environment that brings out the creative potential of kids (and adults) of all ages, and some older kids shy away from “baby stuff.” It’s also important to create a space that looks different from the other spaces children and parents inhabit. Unusual things develop and unfold when the environment is gently and comfortingly different.

• **We provide multiple mini-environments.** Dark cozy spaces like our starry tent, universe closet, lava lounge and big wide spaces where children can run and jump expand the possibilities of the space, allowing for more types of activities and interactions. Quiet spaces are necessary for cooling down over stimulated kids.

• **Extra players.** Many parents are great at playing with their kids. Some are too exhausted to do much of anything except flop down on a foof. Perhaps they have not slept for a couple of nights, perhaps they are not playful people in the first place. We have volunteers to play with children when parents won’t or

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can’t. This allows parents to relax, rest, strike up conversations with other parents that may lead to friendship or exchange of valuable information.

• **A space tender** is necessary to greet people, explain the program, and be mindful of the feel in the room. If the energy level gets too high, the space tender can use music to bring down the tone, or ask parents to take their overstimulated children outside for a break, or tape a piece of paper to the floor and initiate a group art project. The space tender also makes sure that everyone has signed a waiver and that there aren’t too many people in the room.

• **Simple ritual.** Because of the mats, the space tender asks that everyone take off their shoes when they come to play. This also gives parents and kids something to do the minute they arrive, easing the awkwardness of transition.

• **Follow the child.** Volunteers, staff, and regular parents model the basic principles of progressive education, that is following the child’s passions, learning through playing, offering many different modalities of play, and generally maintaining a flexible and open approach and inquiry into anything the child wants to do (within the bounds of safety and sexual propriety). Individual child-led play works well for most children with disabilities, many of whom are lost in group activities. Parents and volunteers need to remember not ask too many questions, to be quiet, to observe, to not bombard children with options. Only if a child looks lost and unhappy would you, say, offer an intriguingly furry blanket or a squishy ball. Most often, the child will lead you to an interesting and unusual exchange of movements, ideas, words, tones, and so forth.

• **Celebrate the child as is.** American society is geared towards fixing things. In the world of disability, this means parents feel pressure to try every sort of therapy, medicine, diet, and behavior plan in order to “fix” their child. While these techniques may be valuable—we are not against therapy!—both children and parents need time to relax, to accept themselves as they are, to appreciate what they have. How does this work in practice? We greet each child by name, we do not ask about diagnosis², and although we are open to discussing

² For record keeping purposes, families who chose to become members do fill out a form that asks for diagnosis, but filling out this form usually happens after families have become involved in Extreme Kids.
diagnosis and treatment if parents wish, we try not to do this in front of the children. We cheer every cool thing the child does or displays right now, and do not measure it against what they might later achieve or lose.

- **Compassion towards parents.** In general, it is much more difficult raising a child with disabilities than raising a neuro-typical child. Parents of children with disabilities usually have less money, less help, less sleep than they need, along with a simmering uncertainty about their child’s future and a caving in feeling that they are not doing enough. To take some of the stress off of parents, we keep bureaucracy to a minimum. There are no ten page forms to fill out, no boxes that reduce children to categories. Many of our events can be planned in advance or decided on at the last minute, allowing for spontaneity and lots of wiggle room. Our staff and volunteers are intimately connected with disability. The incomprehension and condescension that can occur at schools, doctors offices and social service agencies rarely happen when everyone in the room has a deep and humble acquaintance with disability.

- **Whole family approach.** We have found that the best way to include both neuro-typical and children with disabilities in our programs is to involve siblings along with parents. Many siblings are great at guiding their peers through socialization play. Just as importantly, siblings get to meet one another in a low key and fun atmosphere, express themselves through art and movement, and understand in an experiential way that they are not alone, that there are other kids, like them, who share the strange gifts, pains, and injustices of having a sibling with a disability.

- **Disability ratio.** While neuro-typical families may visit, the feeling of openness and deep acceptance works best when the majority of families in a room have a child with disability.