

Regina cafe with childcare and free co-working space aims to help moms succeed ^[1]

Supervised play area \$10-15/hour for parents, complimentary meeting rooms for all

Author: Soloducha, Alex

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EXCERPTS

Brain Snacks may look like a traditional cafe, but CEO Donna Rae Crooks said her organization goes further, by supporting women working to achieve their career goals while raising children.

Crooks, a public servant for the government of Saskatchewan by trade, has three sons. When she had her first maternity leave six years ago, she wondered if there was a way to integrate work and motherhood.

This June, she opened her business in the Regina's east end that she thinks does just that.

It's a coffee shop, with vegan and gluten-free options, but it also has a free co-working space for students and entrepreneurs.

In the back, there is a childminding area run by early childhood educators and education students.

"It can be really difficult to integrate work and life when you have a young family or as a woman out in the workforce," said Crooks. "We get a lot of students, actually, and women with home-based businesses and entrepreneurs, and they can basically use our space while we watch their kids, enjoy our coffee and our snacks and get something done."

The supervised play centre is open between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m., Monday-Friday, and parents can drop off their kids at the spur of the moment. There are children's classes most mornings. The classes cost \$15 per child, \$10 for each additional hour, \$8 for half an hour and \$150 monthly.

Crooks said she wanted to make sure it was an enriching environment for kids to learn and socialize, so they do a lot of sensory play and development activities so that moms feel their children are getting something out of the experience too.

It's impressed Erika Tkatchuk, a mother of two who runs two businesses.

"They're doing developmentally appropriate things and they're not just in front of a TV or in front of an iPad that a lot of other businesses that have child-friendly areas would facilitate," said Tkatchuk. "There's a lot less guilt. I'm able to do all of the things that I love simultaneously, which, when you're a parent it's really difficult to manage all those elements."

Tkatchuk has a sustainable diaper startup called Lil Mak Diaper Co. and owns Trench Fitness with her husband.

"I love working and I also love being a mom and you're able to assume both identities in this place," she said. "They don't judge you, there's support, there's all of the things that you could want as a mom."

"There's also a really great environment and vibe in the front coffeehouse area to have a meeting and be a grownup, even if you wanted to just have some alone time."

Tkatchuk said some of her clients don't have kids and when she brings them to Brain Snacks for meetings, they don't even know there are children there. She said she also uses the coffee shop to do social media marketing and shop online, while her 3-year-old toddler gets to make friends.

Social work student Kendra McMurray also has a three-year-old. Her son Ozzy attends classes at the centre while she studies and works on assignments.

"It's super challenging when we're at home because I feel like he wants my attention and he's trying to find things to do or wants to play with me and I feel bad," said McMurray. "But here it's great because I know he's having fun and doing different things that he wouldn't do at home and that he's looked after and safe so I can focus on school."

McMurray said she found Brain Snacks on social media and immediately texted her best friend Emily Ollinger, a nursing student who has a four-year-old son and eight-week-old daughter.

"At home it's really hard to share my attention between the two so it's really comforting to know that [my son's] got a structured activity to do while I can sit with baby and get a couple things done."

Another division of Brain Snacks is focused on helping women with their careers. There are professional development activities and classes on social media marketing, writing, presentations and business 101.

There are also monthly networking events and on Oct. 20, Crooks will be hosting "The Guide to the Mommy Galaxy," a class for expecting mothers on how their career, earning potential and relationships will be impacted and strategies for keeping up with a career and personal life as a mother.

Crooks said she wants every woman to reach their full potential.

"When you're at your peak performance you just feel euphoric, like you could take on the world and do anything," said Crooks. "Having Brain Snacks has really helped me with that because every day I sort of see my vision coming to life."

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