

A playground designed to exercise the mind

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Forget about see-saws and monkey bars. A new park in McFarland has been built with equipment meant to exercise children's imaginations.

With features such as a "sensory table" — an elevated sand box that can be filled with different tactile materials such as pine cones or pea gravel — and a special garden to attract butterflies, the McFarland Discovery Garden is made to appeal to the senses, said Jennifer Heaton-Amrhein, president of the Friends of McFarland Parks, the group that organized the park's construction.

Even part of the fence surrounding the park is in on the act. Built with varying lengths of metal pipe, it can be used like a set of chimes to produce

sounds and simple songs.

On a hot day recently, the loudest sounds in the park came from a nearby construction site. But even then, a few children were playing on the park's train-shaped jungle gym.

About once a week, McFarland resident Katie Burrs brings her 1-year-old son, Brett, to the park, where he loves digging in the sensory table and climbing on the jungle gym.

Sensory or discovery parks have been gaining popularity in the Midwest. The McFarland park — which opened in October but celebrated its grand opening last month — is located next to the village's E.D. Locke Library.

"We wanted to link the park to the library and to extend the idea of learning," said Heaton-Amrhein.



Playground equipment at the new Discovery Garden, such as this jungle gym shaped like a train, is intended to engage children's senses.

New 'sensory park' focuses on active imagination

The park includes a garden filled with flowers that attract butterflies, a reading garden and a small stage because "we thought librarians could read a story in the garden and then kids could act it out on the stage."

The community was involved from the beginning, offering suggestions to the architects on what the park should include. Volunteers, some of them as young as 4 years old, built the park.

"The kids loved it," said Friends of McFarland Parks vice president Julie Connor. "Working on the park was a great family activity, and we had quite a few kids who were down there working for hours at a time."

E. D. Locke librarians have also received feedback about the park, which has turned the library into even more of a local destination.

"I think it's great because if the kids are feeling a little too energetic, it's right out there and they can expend some of that exuberance," said Geri Cupery, youth services librarian.

The McFarland Discovery Garden is open seven days a week and is located at 5920 Milwaukee St. in central McFarland.



Photos by STEVE AF

Kylie Babcock, 6, and Vincent Babcock, 2, play on a jungle gym in McFarland's Discovery Garden, what is known as a sensory or disc