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MANHATTAN'S LARGEST CIRCULATION DAILY  
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Bobby and Alison Berna, left, and their daughters, Sydney and Maddie, both 2, and fellow co-founders Allison and Craig Schlanger and their sons, Sam and Ari, both 2, have fun at Apple Seeds. (Jefferson Slogol)

# Small kids, big industry



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**SMALL BUSINESS**

When Alison Berna and Allison Schlanger's twin strollers collided in a cramped elevator some two years ago, little did they know a tight-squeezed ride up to their children's afternoon music class would turn them into close friends, let alone business partners.

In March, after commiserating as parents in a sometimes kid-unfriendly city, the two mothers and their husbands combined their personal savings to open Apple Seeds on 25th Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue.

The 15,000-square-foot space caters to the fast-

growing number of families with small children in the Flatiron District, looking for alternative play-space options than their apartments and nearby Madison Square Park.

From a New York-themed indoor playground, to art, music, cooking and language classes, among other activities, Apple Seeds offers "one-stop shopping," said Berna. It's a chance for an underserved community of families in the neighborhood to play and learn under one roof, she said.

Annual membership for one family runs \$750, which guarantees access to the playground all day, any day.

A family membership plan includes the children

and up to five caregivers, including the parents, the nanny, grandma, Uncle Joe, whoever. "We had members before we entered the door. People trusted us on an idea and the belief that this would happen," said Berna.

Tracey Bianco and her 17-month-old son Maxwell joined Apple Seeds months before its doors officially opened.

Mother and son say they're getting their membership's worth, visiting the playground nearly two hours a day. "It's like our second home," said Bianco, who, as a parent, prefers Apple Seeds to a public playground in the park, because she believes it's safer. It also beats staying in their small apartment for a play

date, she said. "I don't have to buy all these toys ... and I don't have to clean up!" Maxwell's favorite activity so far has been sorting through vegetables at the pretend deli.

The one potential downside to the business is that it's somewhat weather-driven. On a recent 80-degree Friday afternoon, the space was not as bustling as on rainy days, when it's packed with crawling tykes.

To counter that, Apple Seeds is doubling its class offerings to about 80 learning programs, including Spanish, ballet, soccer, prenatal yoga and theatre.

Also on tap is a cafe and a children's hair salon in the fall. Most people don't commit to a place like this until after summer," said co-owner Craig Schlanger. "September expects to be a good growth month."

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