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## Every kid's dream - a new toy store opens in Lafayette

By Vera Kochan



Five Little Monkeys has toys for the young and the young at heart Photo Vera Kochan

The toy store chain known as Five Little Monkeys has opened its seventh store in Lafayette (3527 Wilkinson Lane in La Fiesta Square), taking up residence in the space formerly occupied by Cake Box Bakery. The company's other locations are in Albany, Berkeley, Burlingame, Corte Madera, Novato, Walnut Creek and store number eight in Pleasanton.

Owner Stephanie Sala's first store opened in 2001, and with her family background, her involvement in the toy industry was almost inevitable. Her father, Andre Sala, a renowned designer of infant developmental toys, and her mother, Anna Hobbet, a co-owner and founder of a children's wear manufacturing company with several stores in the Bay Area, served to provide insight and support for Sala's toy store venture. The store's name, Five Little Monkeys, is a descriptive family phrase used to refer to Sala and her siblings. Her kids, ages 20 and 17, have both worked in her stores.

When asked if she had an eye to opening a store somewhere in Lamorinda, Sala replied, "It's been in my mind for a long time - I am always drawn to areas with good school districts that seem to really support local. As soon as I saw the old Cake Box building, I fell in love with it! It is a charming building that fell into disrepair and needed someone to love it and see a future for it."

Officially opened in late July, the store is a feast for the eyes as well as the senses. According to their website, "Five Little Monkeys is a community based, hands-on toy store focused on providing unique, high-quality toys in a fun and friendly environment. Our carefully curated selection focuses on creative toys for imaginative minds that are educational, sustainable, and have exceptional play value."

Store Manager Cassie Warner agrees. "It's non-stop on the fun! You want to open stuff up and say, 'What is this?'"

It's not often when a toy store encourages children to interact with the toys, but Sala finds that concept very important. "Admittedly, this has been more challenging since COVID, but I always wanted to be a hands-on toy store where kids could play and experience toys first hand, rather than a place where kids were scolded and told, 'Don't touch that!'"

Five Little Monkeys sells toys that appeal to newborns as well as teens, and there's even a small "nostalgia" section stocked with Slinkys, Etch A Sketch, and other toys, for adults who want to walk down memory lane.

The store and its contents are meant to bring out the kid in everybody. A floor-to-ceiling English cottage contains child-size kitchen appliances; and running along the upper circumference of the establishment is a diorama that will have a moving train rolling past the scenery. Dolls, stuffed animals, costumes, games, LEGOs, books, and toys to develop cognitive learning skills are just some of the many offerings at Five Little Monkeys. All this, and free gift wrapping with purchase.

Having won more than 25 regional and three national awards/recognitions, the chain was the first toy store to become a Green Certified Bay Area Business by offering toys whose impact on the environment is minimal. "I was reluctant to go into business at first, but my mom encouraged me, pointing out that if I had my own business I could run it however I wanted," explained Sala. "I made a commitment to my employees, the environment, the local community, and to the concept of learning through play at the outset."

Five Little Monkeys also takes pride in donating to local schools and nonprofits, as well as sponsoring youth sports teams and events. "We feel so loved and appreciated by the Lamorinda community already!" Sala stated. "We are very pleased with our decision to move here."

Store hours are: Sundays - Wednesdays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Thursdays, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m.; Fridays-Saturdays, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. For more information visit: [www.5littlemonkeys.com](http://www.5littlemonkeys.com) or phone: (925) 633-

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