



# The Case for Children's Museums

## THE CHALLENGE

- The Compression of Childhood
- Scarce Family Time
- Lost Sense of Community
- Diminishing Community Resources

## THE RESPONSE

- A Celebration of Childhood
- Quality Family Experiences
- Establishing Common Ground
- Building a Creative Community

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***The Case for Children's Museums* is a marketing resource tool for ACM museum members. The case provides a collection of facts, testimonials and language that museums can draw on while creating their own case statement, proposal, volunteer training manual, board orientation document or other materials. A detailed source list is included so that museums can cite original ideas and copyrighted information. *The Case for Children's Museums* can be found in the Member's Only portion of the ACM Web site and will be updated periodically. Contact ACM for details on how to order a printed copy, while limited quantities last.**

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# The Case for Children's Museums

## AN OVERVIEW

**C**hildren's museums are cultural institutions committed to serving the needs and interests of children by providing exhibits and programs that stimulate curiosity and motivate learning. There are approximately 350 children's museums around the world. Here are highlights on how children's museums positively impact children, families and communities.

- **Children's museums help children develop essential foundational skills.**

In the past ten years, neuroscience has confirmed what the social sciences have long contended, that the first years of life are essential to future learning. Grounded in well-established pedagogy, children's museums are leading a movement that combines specific learning objectives with play in informal learning environments that are developmentally appropriate for infants, toddlers and children.

- **Children's museums respect childhood.**

Helping to balance widespread cultural influences that compress childhood, children's museums produce programs and exhibits that transcend age, IQ and experience and empower children to set their own pace.

- **Children's museums light a creative spark for discovery and lifelong learning.**

Research from the University of Illinois finds that children feel bored as much as 50 percent of the time while at school or doing their homework. At children's museums, kids become excited about what they are learning while they are playing. As multidisciplinary institutions, children's museums are defining how to teach the arts, humanities, sciences, mathematics and human relations across generations.

- **Children's museums are environments where families connect in meaningful ways.**

With today's workplace demands, adults have less time to spend with children. Children's museums are places away from work and household distractions, where parents and caregivers can spend quality time with children, learn something new themselves and experience the luxury of becoming lost in the present moment as they play.

- **Children's museums serve as town squares and build social capital.**

A landmark examination of civic engagement, *Working Together: Community Involvement in America*, indicates that children are one of the most likely subjects to motivate community involvement. Children's museums engage families and individual citizens to share their talents and points of view.

- **Children's museums are uniquely positioned to help reverse stigma and discrimination.**

Children's museums are popular, yet neutral, sources of information, attract a diverse cross-section of people and provide shared experiences through interpretative and interactive exhibits. By exposing adults and children to unfamiliar concepts in a non-threatening, hands-on approach, and ensuring that the museum experience is accessible to those of differing abilities and backgrounds, children's museums create bridges of understanding.

- **Children's museums strengthen community resources that educate and care for children.**

Children's museum art, science, math, music, literacy and other exhibits and programs for children are valuable resources, especially in communities where such programs have been reduced or completely eliminated from schools and libraries due to budget constraints. Additionally, children's museums hold workshops about informal learning for parents, teachers and childcare professionals.

- **Children's museums contribute to local economies and reduce economic barriers.**

More than 30 percent of children's museums are part of a downtown revitalization project. According to ACM data, the total economic activity of its children's museum members is \$448 million. Children's museums are sought-after local and travel destinations. More than 30 million individuals annually visit children's museums around the world. One in two children's museums offer discounted/free admission for low-income individuals.

## THE CHALLENGE

**F**amilies want the best for their children. However, the 21st century is a frenzied environment for parents and caregivers trying to navigate the best course for their children. In today's culture, childhood is compressed; families have less time to spend with one another; individuals, neighbors and communities are detached; those with different physical and mental abilities, as well as those new to a community, are asked to either assimilate or remain separate; and resources that educate, care for and promote communities are stretched thin by demands to do more with less.

### THE COMPRESSION OF CHILDHOOD

Stressed parents hustle their children from one activity to the next in an effort to keep them safe, stimulated and busy. Pervasive media and technology expose young children to products and concepts better suited for older audiences (Schor 2004). In an effort to raise academic achievement in later years, young children are expected to learn more earlier. However, while children are growing up faster cognitively and physically, research has shown that they are maturing at the same rate emotionally as they have in earlier years (Roban 2000).

### SCARCE FAMILY TIME

Jobs have become less secure and more demanding—making it increasingly difficult to achieve a balance between work and personal life. The proportion of dual-earner families has increased markedly over the past 20 years, and in three-quarters of these couples, both partners work full time. The pooled time available for family interaction is decreasing for parents (Bond et al 2002). For single parents the time demands are even greater.

### LOST SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Many people are distressed about a perceived loss of community and community values. Evidence indicates that people sign fewer petitions, belong to fewer organizations that meet, know their neighbors less, meet with friends less frequently, even have dinner with family less often (Putnam 2000). Historically, people in every culture have been discriminated against based on their disabilities, race, religion, sexual orientation or ethnicity. Such discrimination has deprived people from many of the social and educational opportunities available to others and in some cases has led to violence. Meanwhile the number of people with disabilities and the number of minorities in the United States continues to increase. In fact, four states are described as having a “majority-minority” population (Brewer and Suchan 2001).

### DIMINISHING COMMUNITY RESOURCES

In a recent study, 37 U.S. states and the District of Columbia identified a lack of resources or unpredictable funding levels as the most pressing school finance issue, particularly given state revenue trends (Edwards et al 2005). Cities and counties, facing record budget deficits, are choosing to cut library services to avoid reducing funds for public safety services (Adler 2000). Head Start programs continually face budget cuts. Local chambers of commerce scour to find organizations that will boost lasting economic development.

**Set against these challenges, one wonders: Where is the place for children, families and communities in this reality?**

*Half of all parents say they end most days feeling that they spent less time than they wanted to with their young child.*

**—ZERO TO THREE**

*40% of schools do not provide children with recess.*

**—American Association for the Child's Right to Play**

## THE RESPONSE

**C**hildren’s museums are unique places that bring children, families and communities together for quality interaction. Offering lifelong learning opportunities for audiences as tender as newborns, children’s museums are vital cultural institutions. Serving as beacons amid a frenzied environment, children’s museums celebrate play and creativity; provide activities that nurture family relationships; establish common ground in communities; collaborate with traditional educational and social service organizations and build creative communities that improve the quality of life. Grounded in well-established pedagogy, children’s museums are leading a movement that combines specific learning objectives with play in informal learning environments. As highly desirable meeting places and as proponents of play, children’s museums bring a world of possibilities to families who want the best for their children.

*Some people talk about play as if it were a relief from serious learning or even worse: a waste of time. But for children, play is exceedingly serious...and important! In fact, play is a way for children to learn who they are, how the world works, solve problems and to express feelings. Yes, play is the real work of childhood, and for young people today, many children’s museums offer play experiences that other settings are not able to give them.*

—Fred Rogers

## A CELEBRATION OF CHILDHOOD

*Peek inside an early childhood development exhibit and you will see babies and toddlers touching a variety of textures, stacking blocks, crawling through tunnels, collecting vegetables in a garden or blowing bubbles. These simple play interactions are stimulating connections in the brain.*

**C**ountering the compression of childhood, children’s museums are places that don’t impose a strict agenda or schedule, where children can spend time playing.

- **PLAY FOR BOTH SIDES OF THE BRAIN, FOR THE BODY AND SPIRIT**

Children’s museums encourage children to think for themselves, expand their problem-solving repertoire through creative exploration and exercise both their bodies and their minds. Indoor and outdoor exhibits, programs and workshops are designed to engage children in simple and complex forms of play that result in foundational learning.

The landmark study “Learning in Children’s Museums: Is It Really Happening?” confirms that while children play in a children’s museum, observable and quantifiable learning takes place (Puchner et al 2001). From simple cause and effect; to small motor skills, to informational, procedural learning; to conceptual cause and effect, the study documented changes in children’s mental representations due to experiences at a children’s museum.

In *Rethinking the Brain, New Insights into Early Development* (Shore 1997), it is reported that at birth, an infant has about 100 billion brain cells (neurons). Each neuron can produce up to 15,000 connections (synapses) to other neurons. The first three years of life are when the vast majority of synapses are produced.

Joseph LeDoux, professor of science at New York University’s Center for Neural Sciences writes while nature is responsible for the brain’s basic wiring, experiences do change its actual structure. Brain development is “activity-dependent,” meaning that neurons and synapses must be stimulated through environmental experience. An individual’s capacities are not fixed at birth (LeDoux 2002).

A May 2003 *Young Children* article, “Chopsticks and Counting Chips,” lists a number of studies that show the links between play and many foundational skills and complex cognitive activities such as memory (Newman 1990), self-regulation (Krafft and Berk 1998), distancing and decontextualization (Howes and Matheson 1992; O’Reilly and Bornstein 1993; Seigel 2000), oral language abilities (Davidson 1998),

### FIVE ELEMENTS OF PLAY

**Play...**

**...is pleasurable and enjoyable;**

**...has no extrinsic goals;**

**...is spontaneous and voluntary;**

**...involves active engagement; and**

**...contains a certain element of make-believe.**

—Catherine Garvey

symbolic generalization (Smilansky and Shefatya 1990), successful school adjustment (Fantuzzo and McWayne 2002) and better social skills (Corsaro 1998).

• **PLAY AND LEARNING: A LIFELONG CONTINUUM**

In a 2000 report published by National Academy Press, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, researchers conclude that early learning is critical to the lifelong learning continuum, “because it sets either a sturdy or fragile base for what follows.”

Focus groups in an ongoing study conducted by Families and Work Institute and supported by Civil Society Institute<sup>1</sup> revealed that most children define learning as “learning stuff.” They see learning as the acquisition of facts—information they need to know—and as gaining skills. “The problem is that there is no joy in learning for these children....Little if any curiosity. Little if any excitement. Learning, as they seem to see it, is only for a distant and vague future. It is not something for now.”

These comments echo the findings of studies conducted by Reed Larson from the University of Illinois on how older children spend their time (Larson 2000). When children are at school or doing their homework, they report they are bored as much as 50 percent of the time. Larson finds that museums, libraries, schools and other community learning environments give children experiences that keep the “fires of learning lit.” By providing opportunities to learn through playing, children’s museums are redefining learning so that children are excited about what they learn not only for the future, but also for the present moment.

**QUALITY EXPERIENCES FOR FAMILIES**

*Look inside a children’s museum and watch a family enter a 19th century ship. The youngest, a child of seven, tries his hand at hoisting a net full of fish; his older sister then challenges him to take part in a fishing derby. Afterwards, the father guides the children on how to raise and lower sails and semaphore flags. Sparked by the exhibit’s maritime history component, the grandmother shares a memory about her late husband’s service in the Korean War.*

**C**ountering the challenge of scarce family time, children’s museums are a place away from domestic distractions, where parents and caregivers have the chance to get lost in the moment of interacting with their children.

According to the Institute for Learning Innovation, family learning is defined as the process of social interaction, collaboration and sharing among members of a multi-generational group across the lifespan of the family.

Within the context of a children’s museum, research indicates that learning is more likely to occur with adult interaction than without (Gaskins et al 2001). Through family support such as verbal coaching, modeling behavior, physical assistance and dialogue, children are able to make developmental leaps (Beckstrom et al 2005).

A 1997 ZERO TO THREE survey<sup>2</sup> revealed that while parents understand that their children’s earliest years powerfully shape later development and learning, they are often unsure about what they should be doing to promote healthy emotional, social and intellectual development. Children’s museums translate research findings into clear, practical messages for parents. Museum staff, signage and exhibit environments inform adults and children about the characteristics of play and how to encourage play. In other words, children’s museums serve as play mentors, teaching families how to learn together through play.

Finally, family learning and children’s museums are more than informal contexts to sharpen knowledge and skills. Children’s museums provide families a rich social and leisure time experience.

*We live about 40 minutes drive from [the museum] and my Grandma and I got to spend a lot of quality time coming down [to the museum] and talking. I really valued that time together. I probably wouldn’t have got to spend that time with her otherwise.*

—The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis Y-Press program participant<sup>3</sup>

*Play is to early childhood what gas is to a car. It is the very fuel of every intellectual activity that our children engage in.*

—Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff

*For better or worse, children live in an adult-centered world. When they enter a magical world where this is not the case, it is a truly energizing experience.*

—John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking

## ESTABLISHING COMMON GROUND

*Walk outside a children's museum and hear representatives from the local Humane Society talk about what it takes to adopt and care for pets. Back indoors a museum volunteer, who just happens to be legally blind, is helping an exhibit coordinator build, paint and install a new exhibit about caves. Down the hall a local firefighter talks to kids about fire safety. That same fireman along with fellow public safety personnel, met with families at the museum days after the 9/11 tragedy in an impromptu community gathering.*

**C**ounteracting a lost sense of community, children's museums build social capital and engage neighbors to meet and exchange information, talents and points of view.

A landmark examination of civic engagement entitled, *Working Together: Community Involvement in America*<sup>4</sup>, finds: "A focus on children and youth is key to engaging Americans....In both focus groups and the survey, children and youth registered among people's top concerns and [the subjects] most likely to motivate community involvement."

### • CREATING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS AND CONVERSATIONS

A recent Rand Research in the Arts study states that intrinsic benefits to the public arise from the collective effects that the arts have on individuals (McCarthy et al 2004). By exposing adults and children to unfamiliar concepts in a non-threatening, hands-on approach, and ensuring that the museum experience is accessible to those of differing abilities and backgrounds, children's museums create bridges of understanding.

A sense of belonging to one's community is at the heart of social capital. For children and families, the children's museum has emerged as the community institution providing a unique, interactive environment where children and adults connect. Children's museums intentionally invite community members to participate in museum exhibits and programs.

Children's museums are popular, yet neutral, sources of information, and have the unique position to make a real difference towards reversing feelings of stigma and discrimination for those often on the "outside." Furthermore, museum activities often combine recreation with education giving children excellent outlets for creativity and self-expression.

### • CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS AS MODERN TOWN SQUARES

The old-fashioned idea of a central location in a community for gathering and disseminating information, ideas and products for all citizens has not lost its appeal in today's culture. Children's museums serve as modern town squares in several important ways.

Children's museums offer an important physical infrastructure in communities. Some children's museums are also the library, the after-school enrichment center, the summer camp as well as the local voting precinct. A true town square attracts all community members. Children's museums not only attract but also reach beyond specific programming to address basic questions of access and reach. Many feature bi- and trilingual signage and educational materials, offer discounted/free admission days and bring museum resources directly into neighborhood settings. Children's museums intentionally and thoughtfully welcome community participation in the museum experience. Children's museums invite local citizens to demonstrate talents and to share from their cultural backgrounds. Through all these actions, children's museums help build strong communities.

The Civil Society Institute, a foundation and think-tank dedicated to understanding new forms of civil society, believes that the level of creativity and social inventiveness in communities will lead us to a remarkable renaissance of community life in America. The spark for much of this social inventiveness is the drive to improve the quality of life and opportunity for our children.

**As client-centered organizations, the needs and interests of the audience, the motivation to learn and the empowerment of the visitor through contact and direct experience with objects are as important as subjects or content focus.**

**—Association of Children's Museums**

- **69% of ACM children's museums are located in urban areas**
- **21% in suburban areas**
- **10% in rural areas**

**—Association of Children's Museums**

## BUILDING A CREATIVE COMMUNITY

*Listen to a children's museum workshop and discover a group of Head Start teachers learning innovative methods to prepare at-risk children for kindergarten. Then, follow a raucous noise down the hall to the group of third-graders—whose school recently lost its music program—creating tunes and conducting an orchestra at interactive stations while learning about melody, tempo and tone color. The teachers will leave with a list of activities that will blend with the class curriculum and the students will leave with activity books designed to bring the concept of museum learning home.*

**C**ountering the reality of diminishing community resources, children's museums strengthen the communities they serve.

To help leverage the collective power of community and service organizations such as public schools, childcare centers and other community-based organizations, children's museums are fortifying resources that educate and care for children. Through workshops and collaborative efforts, children's museums bring informal education expertise to the table to complement or enrich existing institution programs.

Through the network of children's museums, innovative ideas—such as forming city-wide partnerships to coordinate a kindergarten preparedness program, an outreach art program for homeless children or a family learning program that teaches parents and caregivers how to support their children's school learning—are passed on from museum to museum, and interpreted for each community.

Through the children's museum experience, children are exposed to a rich environment that cultivates creative thinking. A Case Western Reserve University study found that children who are imaginative when they are young tend to retain this quality as they get older, in addition to becoming better problem-solvers. Tested later in life, early "imaginationists" had more resources to draw on when it came to coping with challenges and difficult situations, such as what do if they forgot a book they needed for school that day (Russ et al 1999).

According to economist Richard Florida, creativity is important across every segment of our economy. It is through creativity that we find ways to resolve problems and to develop or market products and services with a competitive advantage. In his research, Florida finds that the creative sector (science, engineering, technology, arts, culture, aesthetics and knowledge-based professions) accounts for more than half of all wages and salaries paid in the United States. To attract and retain people, Florida contends that planners must build creative communities in addition to offering high-paying jobs, affordable places to live and efficient means of transportation (Florida 2002).

Children's museums support a creative community and economy by providing unique informal learning experiences for families and children, working with community organizations to expand opportunities for all people and by functioning as learning organizations with open organizational cultures.

### • THE FISCAL IMPACT TO COMMUNITIES

And finally, children's museums, while almost exclusively nonprofit organizations, fiscally contribute to local economies. Children's museums are responsible businesses and consumers, employing people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. More than 30 percent of children's museums are part of a downtown revitalization project, not surprising as many city planners regard children's museums as an anchor for nearby attractions, restaurants and retail stores. Around the world, more than 30 million individuals annually visit children's museums.

A creative community is one worth living in and visiting. The Zagat Survey® publication *U.S. Family Travel Guide*, developed in association with the magazine *Parenting*, ranks several children's museums as top destinations by child appeal (Marino et al 2004). The popular Web site of *Child* magazine highlights a list of United States children's museums as the hottest spots for learning and fun<sup>5</sup>.

- 65% of ACM children's museums have a dedicated early childhood exhibit space.
  - 34% run afterschool programs
  - 41% develop curriculum materials
  - 47% provide school outreach
- Association of Children's Museums

*The key to growing a region, a city, a town or a national economy is to nurture, support and mobilize creativity and attract and retain creative and talented people.*

—Richard Florida

Nonprofit art institutions are a cornerstone of tourism. Data collected from 40,000 attendees at a range of arts events (including children's museums) reveal an average spending of \$22.87 per person, not including the price of admission. This spending generates an estimated \$80.8 billion of valuable revenue annually for local merchants and their communities. The findings of this survey also reveal that non-local attendees spend nearly twice as much as local attendees (\$38.05 compared to \$21.75), demonstrating that a community that attracts cultural tourists stands to harness significant economic rewards (Cohen 2002).

**Waving so long for now are the museum staff who greet the visitors; who design and build the exhibits; who conduct the education and outreach programs; and who administer the museum operations and nurture partnerships that revitalize local commerce and community. They will be there to greet tomorrow's children.**



#### FOOTNOTES

1. Families and Work Institute's Ask The Children® Series of studies investigate young people's views of critical issues facing them as they grow up. Youth and Learning is one of the topics included. The focus group cited in this publication took place in 2003. The studies are ongoing and have not been published as of this date.
2. A national poll of more than 1,000 parents, conducted by Peter Hart Research Associates between March 21 and April 1, 1997, was commissioned, and presented by ZERO TO THREE. The survey is available at [http://www.zerotothree.org/register/private/pr\\_041797.html](http://www.zerotothree.org/register/private/pr_041797.html).
3. In 2001, the Institute for Learning Innovation conducted a retrospective study of two in-depth programs at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis one of which, *Y-Press*, engaged teens in researching and writing a newspaper. The individual quoted in this document is identified as *Y-Press* Past Participant: male, 18-26 years old.
4. *Working Together: Community Involvement in America*, is a 1999 survey sponsored by The League of Women Voters and conducted by Lake Snell Perry & Associates and The Terrance Group. The survey is available at [http://lww.org/elibrary/pub/cp\\_survey/cp\\_7.html](http://lww.org/elibrary/pub/cp_survey/cp_7.html).
5. In June, 2001, *Child* magazine surveyed more than 200 ACM U.S. museum members. The forty-four-question survey was developed in conjunction with an advisory board of museum professionals. The survey first appeared in the February 2002 issue of *Child* magazine. The survey is available at [http://www.child.com/living\\_in\\_style/family\\_travel/top10\\_museums.jsp?page=](http://www.child.com/living_in_style/family_travel/top10_museums.jsp?page=).

**According to 2005 survey data, the cost of building and expansion projects currently underway at 66 U.S. children's museums average \$14.1 million for a total planned capital investment of \$930.6 million.**

**—Association of Children's Museums**

**According to 2004 survey data, the total economic activity of ACM children's museums is \$448 million, with total spending by museums at \$291 million and total spending by museum audiences at \$157 million.**

**—Association of Children's Museums**

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