

smart play

**Minnesota**  
**Children's**  
**Museum**

**“...the assembled evidence is remarkably clear—  
play, like nutrition and sleep, is a central  
element in determining an individual’s health,  
well-being, creativity and intelligence. Our  
success as an innovative culture rests first,  
on our recognizing the importance of play,  
then on our allowing play into daily living.”**

**STUART BROWN, M.D., NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PLAY**



*Our mission*  
Sparking children's learning through play.

# Our families and our neighborhoods shape our earliest learning.

Navigating the leap from the intimate learning experiences of family, friends and neighbors to the focused curriculum of the school can be challenging. Minnesota Children's Museum creates a bridge between these two environments. Intentionally designing experiences deeply rooted in educational theory and research, the Museum looks to families and schools as important partners.

Minnesota Children's Museum strives to be an integral community, educational and cultural asset that sparks children's discovery of their world through immersive play and learning experiences. Learning with and from adults who care about children has been shown to enhance meaningful developmental stages, especially for children birth through 10 years.

The Museum's upbeat and cheerful culture can mask that its work addresses some of the most serious challenges confronting our children and families, including:

- ▶ Today's hurried, hectic lifestyle—the hurry-up schedule that often leaves little time for quality informal learning, frequently leads to poor diet and increased amounts of passive screen time.
- ▶ Lack of school readiness and reduced funding for informal learning—50 percent of Minnesota students enter kindergarten with little or inadequate preparation. Once there, decreasing school budgets mean less money for non-academic development.
- ▶ Even in “safe” neighborhoods, parents often feel reluctant to allow the freedom of outdoor play.
- ▶ An ever-more complicated world, where solutions and success will require better creative ability, conceptual thinking and mental agility.

**In the face of these challenges, Minnesota Children's Museum presents a unique haven that brings children, families and communities together for quality, productive interaction.**





# Minnesota Children's Museum aims to...

... be a leader and role model for the community on how children's organizations can effectively complement and enhance community efforts to improve children's lives.

## To this end, we strive for...

... a community where all educators, parents and caregivers recognize the value of play and feel equipped to engage in child-centered play.

... a community where all children are prepared, both intellectually and emotionally, to transition successfully to the formal school environment.

... a community where all children are able to play, learn and grow at their own pace and realize their unique abilities.

... a community where all children are raised to be inquisitive, healthy, happy, productive and empathetic citizens.

Through its exhibits and programs, Minnesota Children's Museum sparks learning through play, making a vital difference for children's futures.





# setting the stage

**By providing experiences appropriate to each stage of child development, the Museum encourages children's success.**

**9 a.m.** The Museum's box office staff greets the first visitors of the day: a young mother pushing a sage green stroller. After a stop in the coat room, she takes the elevator to the fourth floor. She pauses at the entry of *Habitot*, unbuckles her eight-month-old, and sets him down in the pond area. He looks at the mobiles above, the mirror to his side, and the cushy lily pad below him. His mom waggles a cattail to his left, which catches his attention. He rolls over to grab for it.

The Museum's developmentally appropriate approach goes well beyond merely making stairs shorter for young children. It reflects the understanding that preschoolers play with bubbles differently than early elementary students. The timing, rate and pattern of growth varies from child to child. This child development forms the basis of the planning for exhibits and programs. Starting with the audience, the Museum staff creates a developmental profile for different stages in childhood. The staff constantly re-evaluates experiences for different stages of development.

*Habitot*® is a good example of the developmentally appropriate approach. A perennial favorite among the permanent exhibits, it is a safe area where babies and toddlers can make their way through four tot-friendly Minnesota habitats—prairie, pond, forest and cave. Designed to promote children's cognitive, physical and social-emotional development, *Habitot* is complemented by a parent resource room with books and information to help plant the seeds of literacy.



# telling stories

## The Museum fosters a lifelong love of reading by focusing on literacy.

**10:30 a.m.** An announcement invites all Museum visitors to “come on up, or come on down to the second-floor atrium underneath the big flying fish for Story Time.” Kids and adults pile up front while a few grandparents rest on the bench lining the tall windows. The small ones don’t stay sitting for long before the storyteller encourages them to give their best lion roars. Gleeful roars formed by young vocal chords drown out the softly swishing fish tails high above.

Learning to speak and read are the biggest learning events in a young child’s life.

Language connects us to others and helps us join our human families. Reading is a powerful tool for learning, success in school and in life. Stories help us to discover something new about the world and pass our discovery on to others. Emerging literacy skills of listening, speaking, drawing, singing, movement and pattern recognition lay the foundation for reading and writing.

The emphasis on literacy demands not simply one gallery, but a conscious dispersion throughout every book-nook and cranny in the Museum. These settings

offer a place to slow down and delve further into an interesting topic. They are the beginnings of academic research in an easy-reader format.

Private funding has provided the larger-than-life book that opens during Story Time, as well as the many books in each gallery and book nook. Constant rotation brings in new books and new worlds, as well as a need for new bindings and new spines, as more new eyes and new hands begin their love of reading.







# creative thinking

**Through its creative expression emphasis, the Museum inspires young artists and helps children develop identity.**

**11:15 a.m.** In the Curiosity Center, a father lowers a smock over his daughter, who stands still with her arms half-raised expectantly. She then turns back to the easel, where non-spill cups half-full of washable paints await her. The Museum facilitator admires the lines the girl draws, asking, “How did you get that color?” The girl responds “red and blue,” and shows the facilitator how to mix them just right. Ten minutes later, the father slides the fresh masterpiece onto a drying rack. He quickly promises to pick it up before they leave so she can give it to her mom when she gets home.

Creative expression helps children develop a powerful sense of self. Research confirms that the arts play a critical role in early brain development. Even Einstein identified play as “the highest form of research.” Experiences that engage children creatively help integrate their emotional, physical, and intellectual development and enhance their ability to solve problems. Creative expression is broad, encompassing the arts as well as personal views and ideas. In visual arts, music, movement, dance, theater, poetry and literature, children use multiple intelligences to make meaning of their experiences and share them with others.

*Rooftop ArtPark* is an outdoor environment that joins art and nature into a distinctive, and constantly changing,

gallery experience. Springtime finds visitors exploring shadows in a shadow dome and climbing a 12-foot tree fort. Come summer, children create sand sculptures and dip their fingers into a cool streambed. When the crispness of autumn emerges, visitors can see the changing colors of leaves from high above the treetops as they paint with water.

In one year, the Museum documented 30,351 pounds of newspaper transformed into pulp, 144 gallons of paint stroked across paper, 57,810 artists at paint-your-own-face. Financial support and material donations enable the Museum to continue to offer these materials for creative expression, as well as host guest performances and demonstrations by dance troupes, musicians and others.



# inquiring minds

## The Museum instills the spirit of inquiry in children by establishing a comfort and curiosity for science.

1 p.m. In the Discovery Center, Ms. Schneider's fourth grade class rummages through crates of building materials. They compare and select the equipment that is just-right for creating their blueprints. Is it thick enough? Tall enough?

Young children are natural scientists. They try to make sense of their world by using the same skills that adults have refined: observing, questioning, forming theories, predicting, investigating, drawing conclusions and communicating. The Museum provides a context that is concrete and materials that kids can explore with their senses.

The Museum sparks children's innate curiosity by responding to their questions with open-ended challenges. Instead of saying to a visitor, "make a mobile," Museum staff says, "here are some materials...what can you create?"

"The curriculum offered by Minnesota Children's Museum helps children realize that the most wonderful play is that in which they discover things about

themselves and the world around them, rather than having information that requires no response on their part being mindlessly fed to them," says Rich Weinberg, former Museum board member and professor at the University of Minnesota's Institute of Child Development.

*World Works*, a gallery packed with scientific exploration, fosters an early interest in science and technology. By providing opportunities to investigate and experiment with tools and materials, children examine water pressure with ping pong balls, chemistry with bubbles and color changes with light play.



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# healthy lives

## Having fun at the Museum inspires kids to see physical activity as something they want to do.

**2 p.m.** A brother and sister duo squint at the virtual mountain slope in front of them, teetering from side to side to avoid oncoming trees. Their father has already fallen off his balance board twice. The siblings reach the end of the slope and surf the ocean to a triumphant end. They leap off the boards, stamp their Action Trackers, and dart off in different directions: one to strike a tiger pose and the other to push her weight at the self-weighted rower. Their dad decides to challenge his balance one more time.

Children engage in social, sensory, interactive and fantasy play. Young people who would normally avoid exercise may choose to get active physically when they can take on characters or imagine themselves in scenarios. Encouraging children to find their own way of enjoying physical activity increases the likelihood of their being physically active on a regular basis.

Studies show that kids dislike most things that adults label as “exercise” or “good for their health.” Children are much more interested in activities that are appealing now rather than in those that offer a future benefit. The Museum specializes in activities that children find immediately rewarding. When children combine play and physical activity they are more likely to develop healthy habits that will continue into adulthood.

Big Fun! is a daily program to “shake out your sillies” and encourages children to move their bodies in play. Whether the activity calls for wriggling through tunnels, building a block neighborhood, twirling a hoola-hoop, or walking in stilts, Big Fun! engages and challenge children and adults to rethink their meaning of the phrase “physical fitness.”

Minnesota Children’s Museum is a founding member of *Good to Grow!* This initiative, guided by the Association of Children’s Museums, focuses on four topic areas vital to children’s health: healthy foods and nutrition, increasing physical activity, reduction of screen time, and connection to the outdoors.



# being green

**Through its exploration of the natural world, the Museum helps raise environmental stewards.**

**3:15 p.m.** Two children work together, twisting the metal wheels to roll storm clouds over visitors below. “Boom!” one yells. “It’s a big storm!” Inside the anthill, three sisters crawl around until they reach the queen ant. One runs out, another one creeps closer, and the third hops on without a second thought.

Young children need to explore the natural world that is outside their doors to understand nature and develop concern for others.

Investigating natural phenomena encourages a sense of wonder and appreciation of beauty that fosters a child’s development. These experiences lay the foundation of attitudes, values and behaviors that can positively impact the environment and improve the quality of life for children as they grow.

*Earth World* nurtures a love of the natural world by immersing young children in Minnesota habitats. By creating storms and crawling through an anthill, children begin to understand the natural world. From live animal programs in the Lodge to the 500-gallon aquarium, children learn the first steps toward a green lifestyle.







# cultural connections

## **At the Museum, children form a sense of identity, pride, and understanding of their diversity.**

**4:30 p.m.** An announcement reminds Museum explorers that the Museum will be closing in a half hour. On the front porch of *Our World*, a Museum volunteer taps a simple rhythm on a hand bongo. The children gathered on the porch mimic the beat. The call and response method continues as a young mail carrier delivers letters to the porch's mailbox. Next door, siblings cook up an imaginary meal in the kitchen of Sae-Mot Restaurant for their grandparents, who wait patiently at their table.

Children between the ages of three and five begin to form essential attributes of their own identity. Through experience with their bodies and in social settings, children begin to notice differences among people and construct evaluative categories. Children need to develop the ability to empathize with others' experiences in order to form a strong self-concept that does not rely on stereotyping and bias.

*Our World* visitors explore a community with many different people and places. Children experience the joy of being themselves while learning to understand, respect and appreciate others.

Recent renovations to *Our World* created a stronger community partnership with the West Side Community of Saint Paul. With financial backing, the Museum is able to maintain realistic settings for children to role play characters they see in real life.



# partnering with schools

## **The Museum supports high quality training and resources for Minnesota educators to better prepare young learners.**

Currently, half of all Minnesota children are not ready for kindergarten by the time they enter school. The quality of pre-kindergarten education and care varies greatly, putting some children at a severe disadvantage for success in school. Minnesota Children's Museum addresses the issue by providing high quality experiences to set the foundation for later learning and social/emotional development.

“School readiness is not just knowing your letters and numbers,” says Rich Weinberg, child development professor at the University of Minnesota. “It’s about being prepared to learn, which requires that a child has developed some confidence or emotional readiness.”

In partnership with the Saint Paul Public School District, the Museum designs classroom and Museum activities that align with the district’s curriculum and with state learning standards for children four-years-old through second grade. The Museum is currently attempting to align with several other metro area school districts based upon this nationally recognized partnership.

The Museum also partners with educators to complement lesson plans and support curricula. Educators can opt to bring educational resources into their classroom, build school community at a Museum family night and pursue their own professional development at Museum workshops that reach 2,000 educators every year.







# expanding access

## **A two-way interplay between the Museum and low-income communities helps all children reach their full potential.**

Minnesota Children's Museum is dedicated to providing children with high-caliber, informal learning opportunities, but financial barriers often limit access for some families. Making the Museum financially accessible for low-income families is a top priority in the Museum's strategic plan.

Approximately 30 percent of Museum visitors attend free or at reduced admission through one or more of the following Access Program initiatives: Access Family Memberships, discounts for school and community groups, and Target Free Third Sundays and Passport to Play—free Museum passes available at area libraries.

Through the Access Program, the Museum also focuses on community issues that affect children and families. Through its Adolescent Parent Program, the Museum works at schools and community organizations to help young parents learn to become engaged in their children's development.

Because underwriting the Access Program now costs more than \$1 million annually, the Museum relies on financial support to meet the need of low-income families. This support is critical to ensure that *all* children can reach their full potential.



# going places

## **The Museum makes a far-reaching impact as the nation's lead traveling exhibit developer for children's museums.**

Exhibits throughout Minnesota Children's Museum are not only a showcase for learning, they are the fabric that makes the Museum so unique. As the leading traveling exhibit developer for children's museums nationwide, the Museum produces work that is sparking learning in young children across the continent. In fact, more than six million children and families have interacted with Minnesota Children's Museum's exhibits in their hometown children's museums. *Newsweek* magazine recognized the Museum's traveling exhibits program in the May 29, 2006, issue, which includes *Curious George™: Let's Get Curious!* and *Adventures with Clifford, the Big Red Dog™*.

Several Museum staff members manage these amazing traveling exhibits. They identify ideas with strong educational content and visitor appeal. This combination of content and appeal is crucial for the Museum to capture young visitors' attention and deliver high-quality play experiences. Large-scale funding from foundations, individuals and corporations permit this vital piece of the Museum's work.





# your gift, their discovery

As a nonprofit community organization, Minnesota Children's Museum relies on the donations of individuals, corporations and foundations to continue to provide one-of-a-kind experiences and education for children. Forty-five percent of the \$5 million budget comes from contributed income.

An individual's capacities are not fixed at birth. Charitable investments make a vital impact on the Museum's ability to address today's needs and challenges confronting our community's youngest citizens. With private financial support, the Museum can expand existing partnerships, create new relationships and develop the cutting-edge programming that our children, families and all visitors enjoy, learn from, and expect from the Museum.

Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to help continue this work. To learn more, simply contact the development department at **651-225-6001** or visit **mcm.org**.

**The Museum is investing in the future of Minnesota. With your support, this future can be one where children are raised to be inquisitive, healthy, happy, productive and empathetic citizens.**



**“Addressing the challenges [children] face today will have a direct impact not only on the quality of life of children, youth and families, but on Minnesota’s prosperity and quality of life in the future.”**

**ROBERT BRUININKS, PRESIDENT, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA;  
CHAIRMAN, ITASCA PROJECT EARLY CHILDHOOD SUBCOMMITTEE**

# mission

Sparking children's learning through play

# foundational beliefs

Early learning is the foundation for lifelong learning.

Families are our children's first teachers.

All children deserve a time and place to be children.

Diverse perspectives enrich children's lives.

Playing *is* learning.

# Minnesota Children's Museum

*Smart Play*

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