Information Brief:

The power of play in children's museums and elsewhere

Engage in joyful discovery through play!

While an exact definition of play is difficult to articulate, a report from the American Academy of Pediatrics describes it as activity that is, "intrinsically motivated, entails active engagement and results in joyful discovery."[i] In more familiar terms, Fred Rogers shared, "Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood." Play comes in many forms. It can be entirely freeform or structured, as in a game with set rules; it can be physically active or can focus on internal mental states, such as imaginative exploration; one can play solo or with others; it can take place indoors or outdoors, with or without technology or toys designed for play, with varying levels of supervision, in different places, for a short or a long duration of time.[ii] Cultural norms vary with regards to the ways different people are expected to play.[iii] Yet, people of all ages can play, and play is a universal experience found in cultures all around the world.[iv] As we embrace play throughout our work and lives, we can take Dr. Gholdy Muhammed's suggestion of "making joy a learning goal" that can cultivate our genius and nurture thriving communities.

Play is essential for healthy child development.

Infants start to play in their first months of life, interacting with caregivers through simple games of turn-taking, smiling, and mimicking sounds that support bonding and trust within the beginnings of nurturing, loving relationships.[v] As we age, play teaches us how to manage our emotions, practice self-regulation, and interact productively with other people.[vi] Play supports children's physical development and reduces stress.[vii] Not only is play enjoyable and beneficial in childhood, but exposure to play in one's early years has long-term impacts on wellbeing and behavioral outcomes. For instance, people who play more in early childhood are less likely to engage in violent behavior as adults.[viii] Child development experts agree that play is necessary for children's thriving. In 2018, the American Academy of Pediatrics called on pediatricians to begin writing "prescriptions for play" as part of children's regular well-visits.[ix] The United Nations recognizes equitable access to play as a human right for all children.[x]

Play is a safe way for children to assert their agency in the world.

Adults make many decisions that influence children's lives, including where they live, who they live with, what schools they go to, and what types of food, healthcare, recreation, and enrichment are available to them. As children age, it is essential that they develop skills to take increasing levels of agency over their lives; this helps children learn better and develop a stronger sense of self.[xi] As Sevtap Gurdal and Emma Sorbring write, "Defining children as agentic is to grant them a mind of their own and their own will, and thereby acknowledge…children are active in creating meaning in life; they are not only recipients but creators."[xii] Play is one of the central ways children build skills to enact agency and understand how their choices influence other people. Free-play offers a wide range of choice whereas designed experiences can focus children's agency within a physical space, theme, or structure (e.g., a game with an articulated goal). [xiii] In any context, co-learners and facilitators limit or enable the level of choice a child has over their engagement, exposing children to fluid social dynamics and power structures that affect agency.[xiv] Adults and designed learning environments can intentionally create developmentally appropriate opportunities for children to become positive change agents in their families and communities.

Our society has a shortage of play.

Despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of play, many people (of all ages!) are not getting enough of it. In recent decades, our society has emphasized the importance of early academic

learning, leading to increased structure in education and a marked decrease in the amount of time children spend playing.[xv] Since 1980, the amount of time allocated to play has decreased by 25%, with school age children playing more than 12 hours less per week than they did several decades ago.[xvi] This is concerning for the future of our children's development; when children are deprived of play, their brain development, problem-solving, and overall wellbeing suffer.[xvii,xviii] Amongst both children and adults, play has the potential to reduce stress and improve mental health, a crucial need for our society.[xix] While children are leading experts in play, it is also important for parents and adult caregivers to tap into their playful selves. Furthermore, access to play is distributed inequitably across our society. Children growing up in high-income areas typically have more access to parks and safe play spaces than their peers in low-income neighborhoods. Ongoing racial inequality means that today, most Black children grow up in neighborhoods that do not have walking paths, parks, or recreation centers.[xx] Black children's play is further eroded by the tendency for adults to view Black children as less innocent and more like adults than white children, which leads to Black children often being discouraged from playing and receiving harsher punishment for youthful behavior.[xxi,xxii]

Children's museums excel at cultivating play.

Although the benefits of play can occur in many different types of environments, children's museums offer particularly valuable contexts for play. This lies in museums' designed spaces that offer both the freedom of free-choice elements and intentional structure and scaffolding.[xxiii] Research has repeatedly found that this type of "guided play" can lead to stronger learning and development outcomes than unstructured play and in many cases among early childhood learners, it can lead to even stronger academic gains than formal curriculum.[xxiv,xxv,xxvi] The intergenerational learning that occurs in museums (where visitors often come in family or social groups) is distinct from teacher-student dynamics in most schools, offering unique opportunities for adults to guide children's learning. Additionally, museum staff and exhibits facilitate scaffolded experiences with intentional structure for playful experiences. This is particularly important in fostering museum-based play because research shows many adult visitors may undervalue the importance of play or choose not to actively scaffold play themselves.[xxvii]

Children's museums promote physical development and healthy lifestyles through gross motor play.

Many children's museums encourage physically active play, whether that is through exhibits that invite crawling, climbing, sliding, and swinging; programming that engages visitors in dance, sports, or yoga; outdoor spaces for free play; or other means. There is substantial research showing that these types of gross motor play are crucial to children's physical development. For instance, gross motor play builds children's body awareness and strengthens motor skills.[xxviii,xxix] Active play is a valuable way for children to engage in healthy risk-taking, which can support both physical and mental health and reduce self-destructive and harmful behaviors.[xxx,xxxi] Physical play offers motivating ways to develop healthy lifestyles that can be linked to heart health, lower rates of obesity, and reduced stress.[xxxii,xxxiii,xxxiv] Although many families are aware of guidance to keep active, families with young children tend to be more likely to engage in play-based activities than more structured opportunities such as sports or classes.[xxxv]

Children's museums support academic skill development through play.

Different people learn different things in different ways.[xxxvi] However, there is wide acceptance that play is an essential element of learning that supports the development of skills such as language, mathematics, and more.[xxxvii] Play allows people to deepen their number sense; understanding of order, size, and shape; and concepts of addition and subtraction.[xxxviii,xxxix] In language development, play helps children develop vocabulary, practice grammar, and enhance understanding of symbolic concepts such as letters.[xl,xli] Whereas direct instruction is often most effective in leading to specific, content-related learning outcomes, play is vital in supporting the broader and deeper conceptual understandings and skills that underlie content learning.[xlii] This is an excellent opportunity for children's museums to complement broader learning ecosystems: museums that invite children to playfully engage with concepts of numeracy, language, and other academic concepts prime young learners to better absorb formal learning in school. Furthermore, joy, a hallmark of many museum experiences, facilitates learning and intrinsic motivation to continue seeking additional learning.[xliii,xliv]

Children's museums use guided play to promote social-emotional learning for all ages.

Museums are designed to embrace social forms of playful learning, making them ideal places to foster social emotional learning. Through play, we learn to manage our emotions, self-regulate, and communicate with one another.[xlv,xlvi,xlvii,xlviii,xlix] These benefits apply to adults as well as children; play can strengthen bonds between children and their caregivers and reduce parental stress.[l,li] There are many offerings of formal curricula for social-emotional learning that produce positive outcomes, yet there is also evidence that play—particularly free-play and dramatic play—can be even more effective for boosting social-emotional learning than direct instruction.[lii,liii] Moreover, research shows that children's museums' semi-structured environments are more effective in engaging visitors in practicing social-emotional skills than free-play environments like playgrounds.[liv,lv]

Children's museums foster cross-cultural empathy and collaboration.

Museums welcome diverse groups of visitors from all over the world, offering a tremendous opportunity to support intercultural learning. When learners engage with people who have different cultural or conceptual understandings than they do, direct instruction can be ineffective, leading to increased polarization or a rejection of ideas. However, when the same people engage in inquiry-based, open-ended play and exploration, they experience deeper learning and demonstrate an enhanced capacity to collaborate.[lvi,lvii] Beyond free play, museums' designed environments and facilitation from museum staff can aid in scaffolding healthy cross-cultural interactions; even at a preschool age, social exclusion and bullying can easily arise during unstructured play.[lviii,lix] Many children's museums have also developed exhibits that engage children in learning about different cultures and considering perspectives other than their own. This type of engagement can build cultural empathy, reducing perceived barriers between people.[lx]

Children's museums nurture skills of innovation and creativity through play.

The systems of schooling in the United States were developed during a time when industrialization was prominent. In today's economy when many rote jobs can be mechanized and companies often prize innovative and creative thinkers, play may be particularly valuable: play nurtures children's autonomy and offers pathways for learning that are more akin to the demands of today's world than traditional pedagogies that prioritize memorization and compliance.[lxi] Children's museums are already embracing this approach to learning, inviting young learners to make choices about their educational experiences and offering opportunities to create and innovate through art, making, tinkering, and more.[lxii] Spaces like museums give children the opportunity to take creative risks and fail safely in a space where iteration and learning are valued more than objective standards of success.[lxiii]

Play is a powerful experience that enriches people's lives in museums, schools, homes, and beyond.

Play is vital for children, young people, and adults as well. Children's museums have vast experience in creating playful learning experiences that are age-appropriate, hands on, interactive, and joyful. Even beyond their walls, museums form partnerships and build capacity to encourage more playful learning experiences in schools, homes, parks, hospitals, airports, malls, and beyond. Children's museums provide examples of the many ways parents, caregivers, and educators can use play to facilitate wellbeing, healthy brain development, and to make learning more effective and joyful for everyone. As children's museums, we believe in the power of play and we strive to nurture more play and playful learning everywhere we go.

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For more information, visit our website at www.childrensmuseums.org

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