

Association of Children's Museums

The Case for Children's Museums



THE CASE FOR CHILDREN’S MUSEUMS

Children’s museums provide children with hands-on, engaging learning experiences that stimulate curiosity and creativity while fostering essential foundational skills. By offering affordable, inclusive spaces for families and communities to connect, these museums contribute to lifelong learning and community well-being through playful learning.

The case for children’s museum can be made when considering the substantial economic impact of children’s museums, as well as their pivotal role of children’s museums in fostering learning, play, and mental health.

Economic Impact

Children’s museums impact comes in many forms. By employing educators, exhibit designers, and development staff—and the many other people needed to run a museum—children’s museums help develop the community’s labor force.

In addition to serving more than 30 million visitors annually, children’s museums contribute over \$5.5 billion to the US economy each year. This economic activity supports more than 57,000 jobs in 536 job sectors, with more than 40% existing outside museums in areas such as retail, hospitality, and graphic design, to name a few. The economic vitality generated by children’s museums sustains local communities and contributes to regional and national economic growth, with children’s museums spending over \$600 million annually to support the educational, emotional, and creative journey of children and families. Furthermore, cost-reducing programs such as Museums for All allow more than \$4 million to be reintroduced into the local economy.

30 MILLION VISITORS ANNUALLY

\$600 MILLION SPENT ANNUALLY TO SUPPORT THE JOURNEY OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

57,000 SUPPORTED JOBS

OVER **\$4 MILLION** REINTRODUCED INTO THE LOCAL ECONOMY



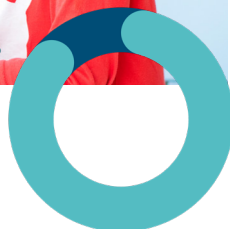
Learning

The early childhood years are a critical period of development marked by rapid intellectual growth. By focusing on early learning for children, children’s museums advance children’s cognitive abilities and build the foundation for school readiness and lifelong learning.



90%

of a child’s time is spent outside of school



Children’s museums use emergent educational approaches that have a child-driven approach, taking into account a child’s skills, needs, and motivations to provide out-of-school learning experiences through their exhibits, summer camps, makerspaces, and mobile programs. Meaningful knowledge acquisition and learning skills are developed through self-directed, experimental, and content-rich playful learning experiences which enhance brain structure, facilitate executive functioning, cultivate early math and language skills, and encourage personal-social development. Partnerships between museums, schools, and communities create a generation of lifelong learners equipped not only with knowledge but also with the resilience, empathy, and self-awareness to navigate life’s complexities with confidence and compassion.

Power of Play

Although the benefits of play can occur in many different types of environments, children's museums offer particularly valuable contexts for play. There are research benefits of play related to children's discovery, health and wellness, and agency, as well as through the crucial role children's museums play in cultivating and providing access to play.

Play is vital for children, young people, and adults as well. As Fred (Mr.) Rogers aptly noted, **“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.”** This is because play is an activity that is “intrinsically motivated, entails active engagement, and results in joyful discovery.” Play is necessary for children to

thrive—pediatricians have begun writing “prescriptions for play” as part of children's regular well-visits.

Children's museums provide valuable spaces and opportunities for play by employing intentionally structured guided play experiences. The American Academy of Pediatrics states, “Play is not frivolous: it enhances brain structure and function and promotes executive function (ie, the process of learning, rather than the content), which allow us to pursue goals and ignore distractions.” These experiences lead to stronger learning and development outcomes than unstructured play and even stronger academic gains than formal curriculum. Children's museums have vast experience in creating playful learning experiences that are age-appropriate, hands-on, interactive, and joyful.

Mental Health

Children's museums have long been invested in creating environments where children thrive. Mental health is a pressing current issue for the children in our communities, and children's museums have expansive opportunity to meet those needs with comprehensive, collaborative experiences that supplement the essential work of mental health professionals—providing all children with the skills to navigate their world with joy, wonder, and wellness.

Mental health is the collection of our social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects that influence how we engage with other people, manage stressful situations, and make decisions. Mental health is a foundational element of child development: children cannot experience optimal growth and development if their mental health is poor and mental health struggles in childhood can have long-lasting effects. By providing enriching experiences that nurture children's mental health, children's museums support children's and families' mental health by allowing children to do what they do best—play! Play is effective at fostering children's healthy brain development, social skills, and the ability to cope with stress. “When play and safe, stable, nurturing relationships are missing in a child's life, toxic stress can disrupt the development of executive function and the

learning of prosocial behavior; in the presence of childhood adversity, play becomes even more important.” Toxic stress in childhood can also lead to chronic health conditions.

Additionally, children's museums are centers for social-emotional learning (SEL), focusing on skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, which are fundamental for navigating complex social contexts and achieving overall well-being. Children's museums draw on research-based practices to intentionally design for social-emotional outcomes such as building empathy, mindfulness, or even addressing specific topics such as children's climate-focused anxieties.

Children's museums also invest heavily in environments and experiences that promote inclusion and belonging. These efforts support children's positive identity development related to race, gender, and other such factors, which is a powerful tool in reducing or eliminating mental health struggles. One exemplary initiative is the field's remarkable participation in Museums for All. This access program extends free or reduced admission to more than 1,200 museums across the U.S. for recipients of food assistance. 71% of children's museums actively participate, opening their doors to 4.5 million children and families.

DISCOVER CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS

The information in the Case for Children's Museums is available as a digital resource for those working in and with the children's museum field. Access the full collection of informational briefs and related materials via the Association of Children's Museums. A detailed source list is included to cite original ideas and copyrighted information.

The Case for Children's Museums is available as a direct download via the QR Code. ACM Members may also access the Case and related tools and templates via the myACM database.





Informational Briefs

Please download these briefs to learn more about Learning, Play, and Mental Health. Click the buttons below to download.

Learning and Children's Museums

Today's teachers face unprecedented challenges in meeting children's learning needs. In a rapidly changing educational landscape marked by shifting demographics, evolving learning paradigms, and never-before-imagined disruptions to classroom learning like the global pandemic, children's museums are invaluable partners to both parents and teachers, providing immersive, interactive, and enriching experiences that complement formal education and contribute to holistic child development.

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The Power of Play in Children's Museums and Elsewhere

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." 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."

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The Role of Children's Museums in Supporting Children's Mental Health

The World Health Organization defines mental health as "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community." Mental health is a complex concept that includes a combination of social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects. These factors substantially influence the ways we engage with other people, manage stressful situations, and make decisions.

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THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS: THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF SPENDING



\$5.5 billion
contributed to regional economy



57,281
jobs supported in **536** industries



\$2 billion
paid salaries

Types of Economic Impact

Direct Economic Impact

The direct economic effects are the typical expenditures of an institution: the money children's museums pay their employees and the money children's museums pay contractors and other businesses as part of normal museum operations.

Indirect Economic Impact

Children's museums pay contractors and other businesses, which in turn spend this money on their own employees and the contractors and businesses on which they rely. This business-to-business spending activity is the indirect economic impact of children's museums' spending.

Induced Economic Impact

The employees of the children's museums, as well as those of successive contractors and businesses in the supply chain, also spend money on food, rent, fuel, entertainment, and more. This spending contributes to the induced economic impact of spending by children's museums. Together, these three effects are combined to describe the total economic impact of an industry sector on the national economy. Museum leaders and economists can use these values to report on current impact or to estimate how planned capital or operating increases or budget cuts will have a ripple effect in a regional economy. In total, the value of economic activity generated by the U.S. children's museum sector is about \$5.5 billion.

No Matter the Size, All Museums Count



WHAT IS A CHILDREN'S MUSEUM?

A children's museum is defined as a nonprofit educational and cultural institution committed to serving the needs and interests of children by providing exhibits and programs that stimulate curiosity, motivate learning, and support the wellbeing of children and families.

Children's museums are unique community institutions where...

- Children are valued citizens with the right to developmentally-appropriate and high-quality learning experiences.
- Play is learning, and it is critical to the healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development of children.
- Family, culture, environment, and society are recognized as critical factors in all children's lives to effectively serve them.
- Pursuing equity and inclusion is a best practice that reflects a commitment to serving all children and families and advancing the growth of our field.

There are more than 300 children's museums in the world serving millions of families, but every institution is unique. Children's museums are known for being joyful spaces for learning and play, and much more than just places to visit. In fact, all children's museums—regardless of size—function as **local destinations** (featuring designed spaces such as exhibits), **educational laboratories** (via programming), and act as community resources and **advocates for children**.

Every children's museum implements these roles differently. They may be at the forefront of critical dialogues around children and families in their communities, leading coalitions, and changing policy and practice. They may also play supporting roles, leveraging their physical locations and relationships to advance partners' efforts.



The Association of Children's Museums (ACM), the foremost professional organization representing children's museums, pursues the mission of championing children's museums worldwide. ACM's vision is a world that honors all children and respects the diverse ways in which they learn and develop.



THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS



As Local Destinations...

- Children's museums are experts in designing learning spaces that elevate naturalistic and child-centered learning that incorporate the latest evidence in positive child development and encourage positive adult/child interactions.
- Children's museums fulfill their role as responsive, audience-focused institutions by striving to reflect and address community needs through the experiences they create.
- Children's museum staff are trained in techniques for working with objects as teaching tools in playful learning approaches, and in exhibits that communicate their meaning or message to visitors in fun and engaging ways.



As Educational Laboratories...

- Children's museums generally operate outside of the strictures of formal education systems, allowing them to act as incubators and innovators, testing and developing child-centered and play-based pedagogies for engaging children in learning.
- Children's museums rely on staff with expertise in learning theories, child development, and pedagogy to develop impactful and cutting-edge education programs and experiences for their visitors.
- Children's museums contribute new knowledge to educational and museum literature through their own research and assessment practices, documenting the impact and value of their programs, exhibits, and services.



As Community Resources...

- Children's museums act as cultural gateways to arts, culture, history and science, often serving as the first point of entry for building lifelong museum going habits.
- Children's museums are an important part of the social service fabric of their communities, providing resources such as health information, parenting classes, safe learning spaces, and teacher trainings.
- Children's museums are a positive symbol of the value a community places on children and families, and how a community treats and respects children.
- The presence of a children's museum helps create more child-friendly communities.
- Children's museums are often anchor institutions for community revitalization efforts.



As Advocates for Children...

- Children's museums are constantly responding to the current needs of the children and families in their communities, from health to academics to social issues, as seen in their exhibits, outreach, and programming.
- Children's museums cultivate deep and wide-ranging relationships with partners from all sectors to best serve all children and families in their communities, and address critical social issues affecting them.
- Children's museums share a commitment to equity and inclusion, with subsidized attendance programs, programs for children and families with special needs, multicultural programming, and more.



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A Word document of the Executive Summary is available at

<https://associationofchildrensmuse.box.com/s/w9z70savj15j3l8a3bai2cgsgsfjok84>

so that you may easily copy and paste language as needed.



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