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In 1899, the city of New York founded a civic institution that was recognized for its educational, entertaining, and community values: The Brooklyn Children's Museum. By 1975, there were nearly 40 museums for children throughout the United States (Association of Children's Museums (ACM), 2013b). Today there are over 300 children's museums in the U.S., with 70 more preparing to open. Children's museums are becoming especially popular tourist destinations for parents. The ACM advocates that children's museums offer an alternative to the highly structured and achievement driven learning that takes place in schools. Essentially, children's museums offer a hands-on approach to learning and serve as driving force for developing foundational skills (AMC, 2013a).

What is a Children's Museum?

A children's museum is a place that encourages curiosity and stimulates learning while bringing families and children together. Within these learning environments, "children's museums light a creative spark for discovery and lifelong learning" (ACM, 2013a). Children's museums are typically identified as "user friendly, interactive, hands-on, attractive, non-threatening and stimulating places" where imaginations can run wild (Mayfield, 2005).

Children's museums challenge the typical stereotype of a museum by providing interactive exhibits for children instead of a traditional museum's exhibits that are often displayed in a way that does not allow personal interaction with the subjects. Traditional museums expect learning to occur without any tactile sensation;

this makes learning inaccessible to very young children who learn through touch and play. Children's museums "produce programs and exhibits that transcend age and experience, and empower children to set their own pace" (ACM, 2013c). Children's museums are found to be fundamentally different from traditional museums in four key ways (Caulton, 1998):

1. Education justifies and is the purpose behind every object, activity, and event.
2. Bright colors and special lighting effects capture children's attention. Also, exhibit labels are written in easy to understand language.
3. Exhibits are placed so that everyone, including the youngest (i.e. shortest) may look at them; exhibits are in a logical identifiable sequence.
4. Contact with the exhibit is the most important source of learning, no matter how sophisticated the exhibit.

Children and the Importance of Play

Early investigation into the development of children from researchers such as John Dewey, Maria Montessori and Jean Piaget helped propel the early growth of children's museums. In the 1920's, Dewey and Montessori introduced research about the significance of children learning through the act of doing. During the 1960's, Piaget continued to study child development, including the effect on intelligence, and showed that children developed best in an environment with interaction (Kinney, 2009; Ginsburg, 2007). In effect, these researchers illustrated that play is essential to the intellectual growth and development of a child.

Current research continues to support the important role of play in child development. Basically, "play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children" (Ginsburg, 2007). Play is deemed so essential that the United Nations has listed it as a right for every child. According to Kinney (2009), "pretend play is one of the most important activities in the social and cognitive development of children." Engaged play in both real life (i.e. a pretend grocery store) and fantasy (i.e. castles or outer space) settings help children re-invent world experiences in terms they are comfortable with and can understand.

Children's Museums Role in Play

"Inquiry-based museums afford unique opportunities for children, parents, and teachers to explore concepts in math, science, art, music, history, and social studies. In these museums, individuals of all ages are encouraged to play because of the richness of experience that play affords" (Henderson, 2007).

Children's museums play a vital role in the learning experiences of children of all ages, but especially for toddlers. Studies have shown that learning begins at a very early age. Museums throughout the nation have encompassed learning through hands-on experience and play to enhance the learning experience of the preschool and toddler set, and also that of elementary and even middle school aged children. Children's museums generally focus on five general themes to enhance learning and the hands-on experience (Mayfield, 2005):

1. Foster pretend play through the supply of dress-up clothes, regalia and settings such as houses, grocery stores, and fire engines.
2. Provide regional or country-specific exhibits. Examples include beaver dams or Viking exhibits.
3. Offer exhibits with an international or multicultural focus to foster learning of other cultures.
4. Introduce the arts culture by providing studio space, theaters or an assortment of instruments.
5. Provide science and technology exhibits such as bubble-making or sophisticated planetariums.

Children's museums offer a positive, educational alternative to many other non-beneficial activities in which children engage. Television, video games, and computers often take the place of the real hands-on learning that children need and also expose them to potentially harmful content. Children's museums provide a wholesome sanctuary away from media violence and instead offer a constructive environment of learning (Ginsburg, 2007).

Challenges Faced by Children's Museums

Children's museums face many challenges in maintaining their institutions as a place where children can learn and play. As non-profit or government-run establishments, one of the challenges that children's museums confront is the ability to obtain the appropriate funding to acquire and maintain exhibits (Mayfield, 2005). Interesting and creative exhibits that appeal to a wide range of ages and backgrounds generally cost approximately \$200 per square foot of space, depending on the type of technology used (Veverka, n.d.).

Another challenge faced by museums is the ability to keep admission fees and memberships affordable so that children from low-income families are able to benefit from the children's museum experience. The San Antonio Children's Museum manages this dilemma through the Learn and Play Pass program. The Learn and Play Pass ensures that no child is denied entry based on economic hardship; it provides subsidized or even free admission for economically disadvantaged families. Learn and Play Pass is financed by foundations, corporations, organizations and individuals that recognize that many underprivileged children in our community do not have the opportunity to take advantage of educational resources like the children's museum (San Antonio Children's Museum, n.d.b). Despite these challenges, children's museums are still growing in numbers because they are seen as valuable resources for children, families and the community.

Local Children's Museums

There are three children's museums which provide hands-on learning experiences to

children under the age of thirteen located within the Kronkosky Charitable Foundation area of interest: the San Antonio Children's Museum and the Witte Museum located in San Antonio; and the McKenna Children's Museum located in New Braunfels.

The San Antonio Children's Museum opened in September of 1995 and since then has had over two million visitors (San Antonio Children's Museum [SACM], n.d.a). "Since 2008, SACM's annual attendance has grown more than 50%" (SACM, 2013). The museum accommodates more than 175,000 visitors each year (SACM, 2013). In October 2011, SACM announced plans to build a new 70,000 square-foot children's museum (Baugh, 2011). The new location will be in the same area that houses the San Antonio Museum of Art, the San Antonio Zoo, the San Antonio Botanical Garden and the Witte Museum. Equipped with an outdoor exhibit space, a café and on-site parking, it is expected that opening year's annual visits will reach over 300,000 (Baugh, 2011).

At the Witte Museum, children can play in the HEB Science Treehouse which offers "four levels of fun and experimentation with Energy, Air Power, Simple Machines, Eco-Science, Weather, and Sound Waves" (Witte Museum, n.d.b). The museum is currently converting this "Treehouse" into a new exhibit called the "Body Adventure," which will teach children about their bodies and living a healthy life (Witte Museum, n.d.a). The Witte Museum is also preparing to add over 65,000 square feet to the campus. The museum recently opened a "20,000 square-foot, two-story building that incorporates the historic Pioneer Hall, serves as a permanent home for the Witte's South Texas collections, exhibitions and public programs" (Witte Museum, 2012b). Construction of the east wing of the Witte Research & Collection Center was scheduled to begin December 2012 and be completed in April 2013 (Witte Museum, 2012a). The next phase of the expansion, the New Witte Phase, will include the Valero Great Hall, Grand Entry, and main campus enhancements. The third phase, the Water Resource Phase, will include Center for Rivers and Aquifers and Riverbend Wetlands. The

major expansion will enable the museum to accommodate over 500,000 guests per year (Witte Museum, n.d.a).

At the McKenna Children's Museum in New Braunfels, children have many options for exploration ranging from Destination Space! to the Town Square where children can try their hands at banking, construction, and newspaper design (McKenna Children's Museum, 2012b). The museum recently added a "one of-a-kind-lucky climber! At almost 30 feet tall, kids and adults can climb their way through a maze of colorful petals on their way to the top" (McKenna Children's Museum, 2012a). The renovations also included adding an outdoor music exhibit, and an imagination playground. Currently, the McKenna Museum is in the process of renovating their popular hospital exhibit (McKenna Children's Museum, 2012a).

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