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# The Parental Role in Children's Museums

## Perceptions, Attitudes, and Behaviors

Stephanie Downey, Amanda Krantz and Emily Skidmore

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### Abstract

Children's museums across the country work very hard to help children learn through play. The need to cultivate parent involvement in children's museum experiences has become central to these efforts as an increasing amount of literature identifies the benefits to children's learning when parents act as play facilitators. However, a visitor study conducted at Please Touch Museum, which explored parents' perceptions of play and their role in children's museums, along with literature in the field, identify three main barriers to parent involvement: (1) most parents lack a clear understanding of the learning benefits of play in children's museums; (2) parents lack confidence in, and knowledge of, how to play with their children in a children's museum; and (3) the nature and design of children's museums may not fully encourage and facilitate parent involvement.

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## Introduction

One look at the mission statements of many children's museums across the country indicates that they advocate for play as essential to children's learning and healthy development. To successfully support children's development and learning through play, children's museums need parents' understanding, support, and participation. As such, many children's museums strive to offer experiences that foster adult-child interaction and to provide resources to help parents realize and value the link between play and learning. But it is not enough that children's museums recognize the importance of parent involvement; they also must understand parents' beliefs about play and their role in children's museum experiences to best garner their support.

Using existing literature in the field<sup>1</sup> and results of an evaluation study conducted at Please Touch Museum (PTM)—the children's museum of Philadelphia—this article explores parents' perceptions and participation related to play and learning in a children's museum. Results of the study demonstrate a gap between children's museum professionals and parents with regard to beliefs about the value of play and the role of adults in children's museums. This gap presents barriers to children's museums' achievement of their missions. In the following article, we explore these barriers and discuss the implications for children's museums.

## Children's Museums' Stance on Play

It is no secret that play is the platform on which children's museums operate. What a casual children's museum visitor may not realize, however, is that many children's museums specifically advocate *learning and development* through play. Look, for instance, at the mission statements of four children's museums from across the United States (see table 1). Learning through play is also instrumental to the Association of Children's Museums (ACM)—a professional service organization that works to further the vision of children's museums—as evidenced by its mission statement, which is “to build the capacity of children's

museums to serve as town squares where play inspires creativity and lifelong learning” (ACM, 2010), as well as its initiatives like *Playing for Keeps*, which advocates for the importance of play in children’s lives (ACM, 2010).

**Table 1. Examples of Children’s Museum Mission Statements**

Museum	Mission Statement
Chicago Children’s Museum	To create a community where play and learning connect <sup>1</sup>
Port Discovery Children’s Museum in Baltimore	Provides experiences that ignite imagination, inspire learning, and nurture growth through play <sup>2</sup>
Children’s Museum of Denver	To create a community where children, newborn through 8, and their grownups learn through play! <sup>3</sup>
Providence Children’s Museum	To inspire learning through active play and exploration <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>(Chicago Children’s Museum, 2009)

<sup>2</sup>(Port Discovery Children’s Museum in Baltimore, 2007)

<sup>3</sup>(Children’s Museum of Denver, 2010)

<sup>4</sup>(Providence Children’s Museum, n.d.)

It is important to note that “play” and “learning” have specific meaning in children’s museums. As opposed to structured play activities (e.g., organized sports), play in children’s museums is meant to be child-directed, process-oriented, and open-ended. This type of play enables children to explore ideas and objects, experiment with cause and effect, imagine and create pretend scenarios, practice motor skills, and solve problems. Decades of research have demonstrated that this type of play helps children develop the knowledge and skills needed to be successful citizens and contributing members of society; such skills include self-control, literacy and language development,

creative problem-solving, abstract thinking, and social negotiation, to name a few (Bettelheim, 1987; Ginsburg, 2007; Oliver & Klugman, 2002; Tsao, 2002). Yet, despite research showing links between play and learning, opportunities for play are slowly disappearing from homes and schools (Ginsburg, 2007; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Miller & Almon, 2008). Children's museums are one of the few places parents can go to play with their children in safe, family-friendly environments.

### Children's Museums' Stance on Parental Involvement in Play

At the same time that children's museums support and advocate for the connection between play and learning, they recognize the importance of parents' role in children's play. *The Case for Children's Museums*, a publication of ACM, states that children's museums are uniquely poised to provide a space "where parents and caregivers have the chance to get lost in the moment of interacting with their children" (ACM, 2005). The publication goes on to discuss the importance of parental support, particularly through verbal coaching and dialogue, in children's play and learning. As such, ACM encourages children's museums to see themselves as institutions that serve children *and* their accompanying adult companions. Some children's museums have taken this to heart, both explicitly and implicitly, by including adults as an audience in their mission statements. For instance, the Children's Museum of Denver identifies children and their "grownups" as primary audiences (Children's Museum of Denver, 2010), and the Indianapolis Children's Museum deliberately changed its mission from "serving children" to "serving families" (Borun, 2008).

Emphasis on supporting the whole family as opposed to just children is based on research demonstrating that children's play is more likely to result in learning outcomes when adults are involved (Benson, 1994; Puchner, Rapoport, & Gaskins, 2001). Further, child advocacy groups have proposed a continuum of play experiences, ranging from completely unstructured play to highly structured, adult-led play (Department for Children, Schools, and Families, UK, 2009; Miller & Almon, 2008). These

advocates argue that a combination of play experiences existing in the middle of the continuum—play experiences that are child-initiated and actively supported by adults, and play experiences that are facilitated (not dictated) by adults—is most beneficial to children. In other words, children need the freedom to initiate play and explore on their own while being supported by adults who understand and abide by their rules of play; and, at the same time, children need adults who know them intimately and can introduce new play experiences that will stimulate growth (Gaskins, 2008; Miller & Almon, 2008). While there is some disagreement among play researchers about the extent to which parents should participate in children's play, there is a general consensus that adults play a key role in the facilitation of play—creating optimal play environments, time to play, and support, which might take the form of encouragement and praise, conflict resolution, or scaffolding (Bettelheim, 1987; Benson, 1994; Puchner et al., 2001; Rogoff, 1990).

### Understanding Parents: Findings from Please Touch Museum

Similar to many children's museums, PTM strives to “enrich the lives of children by creating learning opportunities through play” (PTM, 2010). Play at PTM is defined as being open-ended, child-driven, and process-oriented. To achieve this goal, PTM recognizes that parent involvement and support are necessary, and as such, staff continually seek new ways to help parents understand the link between play and learning and facilitate optimal play scenarios—those that result in a variety of learning opportunities for their children. Thus, as part of a comprehensive, whole-museum evaluation study conducted for PTM, Randi Korn & Associates, Inc. (RK&A) explored parents' perceptions of play and their role at the museum. The study's results are helping PTM create strategies that support parents as they facilitate meaningful learning opportunities for their children through play.

Study findings are notable because they demonstrate a gap between *the museum's* goals for children's experiences (i.e., learning through play) and *parents'* goals for those same experiences.



Figure 1. River Adventures Exhibit at Please Touch Museum *Photo courtesy of Please Touch Museum.*

That is, findings shed light on the differences between staff and parents' perceptions of the value of play and the adult role at the museum. While some studies in children's museums have explored the parent role in children's learning (Puchner et al., 2001), we

found little that explicitly explored parents' perceptions of the value of play or their role in children's museums.

## Methods

RK&A employed three methodologies simultaneously as part of the visitor study: standardized questionnaires administered to 409 adult companions upon exiting PTM, in-depth interviews with 73 adult companions upon exiting the museum, and timing and tracking observations of 168 children ages 3 to 10 as they experienced specific exhibition spaces with their family group. This mixed methods approach was chosen to capture a comprehensive picture of the perceptions and realities of play at PTM.<sup>2</sup>

## Sample

Adult companions are mostly female (70 percent), Caucasian (73 percent), and highly educated (77 percent are college graduates); respondents' mean age is 39 years.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, most were visiting PTM with one (48 percent) or two children (37 percent), and the vast majority were visiting with at least one child under five years of age (89 percent). Eighty percent of adult companions identified themselves as "parent," while the other 20 percent identified themselves as some other type of adult companion, such as a relative, friend, godparent, or nanny (in the rest of the article the word "parent" refers to all adult companions).

## Findings

In discussing the findings, we explore parents' perceptions in three areas: play, PTM experiences, and parent involvement in their children's play at PTM. Findings are presented by methodology.

## In-depth Interviews

In interviews, RK&A asked parents to describe what play means to them, what they value about PTM experiences, and what they hope their children take away from their experiences at PTM. We used a rubric to measure the extent to which parents associate play

and PTM experiences with learning. In doing so, RK&A scored parents' responses on a four-level continuum—"Below Beginning Perceptions," "Beginning Perceptions," "Developing Perceptions," and "Highly Developed Perceptions." On this continuum, "Highly Developed Perceptions" are those perceptions that the museum hopes parents have or attain—explicitly connecting play and PTM experiences with learning. "Developing Perceptions" describe those parents who talk about play and PTM experiences in terms of skill-building (e.g., social development, motor skills), but do not use the word learning or education. "Beginning Perceptions" describe those parents who talk about PTM experiences in terms of enrichment (hands-on or new experiences), but do not describe skill-building. "Below Beginning Perceptions" describe those parents who talk about play and PTM experiences as only fun and enjoyable.

Table 2 shows the scores for parents' perceptions of three specific items: (1) play, (2) the value of PTM, and (3) the outcome of a PTM visit (for children). Only about one-sixth of parents had "Highly Developed Perceptions," *explicitly* talking about play, the value of PTM, and the outcome of a PTM visit (for children) in terms of learning (i.e., used the word learning or education), and one-third or less had "Developing Perceptions," *implicitly* linking

**Table 2. Parents' Perceptions of Play and Please Touch Museum**

	Below Beginning Perceptions (Fun & enjoyment)	Beginning Perceptions (Enrichment)	Developing Perceptions (Skill-building)	Highly Developed Perceptions (Learning)
Perceptions of Play	8%	41%	36%	15%
Perceived Value of PTM	6%	69%	11%	14%
Perceived PTM Visit Outcome (for children)	28%	35%	24%	14%

Percents indicate the percent of parents to score at each level.

play, the value of PTM, and outcomes of PTM with learning (i.e., indicated skill-building but did not use the word learning or education). Also striking is that more parents readily associate play with learning (51 percent of parents had “Highly Developed Perceptions” or “Developing Perceptions”), while fewer parents associate the outcome of a PTM visit with learning (38 percent of parents had “Highly Developed Perceptions” or “Developing Perceptions”), and the fewest parents associate the value of PTM with learning (25 percent of parents had “Highly Developed Perceptions” or “Developing Perceptions”).

These findings indicate that parents' perceptions are more naïve than PTM hopes, but also suggest that parents value PTM primarily for the enriching experiences it provides—experiences that are not necessarily linked to skill-building and learning. That is, educational outcomes do not seem to be a primary motivating factor for PTM visits. However, there is a consistent yet small percentage of parents who explicitly indicate learning when describing play, the value of PTM, and the outcome of a PTM visit for children (14–15 percent), and thus, for whom learning is a motivating factor.

### Standardized Questionnaires

Through standardized questionnaires, RK&A sought to understand how parents value play at PTM in the context of the museum's ideas about play and learning. To do so, RK&A presented parents with eight statements that describe how they might value play at PTM and asked parents to put them in rank order; ties were not permitted. Statements were developed based on the literature about the value of play, what PTM staff values about play at PTM, as well as findings that emerged from early interviews with parents. The statements represent three general categories: skills/knowledge outcomes (enhances imagination, solves problems creatively, and academic achievement), developmental outcomes (healthy brain development, social and emotional well being, confidence), and experiential outcomes (having fun, being active and burning energy).

Table 3 shows the eight statements in rank order from top to bottom. The two statements that clearly ranked at the top (i.e.,

**Table 3. Parents' Ranking of Statements About the Value of Play at Please Touch Museum**

I most value play at Please Touch Museum because it...		Outcome Category	Top Rank (1 or 2)	Middle Rank (3 to 6)	Bottom Rank (7 or 8)
Top Ranked Statements	Provides opportunities for the children I'm with to <b>have fun</b> .	Experiential	48%	39%	13%
	Enhances the <b>imagination</b> of the children I'm with.	Skills/ Knowledge	44%	46%	10%
Middle Ranked Statements	Contributes to the <b>healthy brain development</b> of the children I'm with.	Developmental	26%	54%	20%
	Enhances the abilities of the children I'm with to <b>solve problems creatively</b> .	Skills/ Knowledge	18%	60%	22%
	Contributes to the <b>social and emotional well being</b> of the children I'm with.	Developmental	18%	61%	21%
	Enhances the <b>confidence</b> of the children I'm with.	Developmental	9%	62%	29%
Bottom Ranked Statements	Provides opportunities for the children I'm with to <b>be active and burn energy</b> .	Experiential	24%	38%	38%
	Contributes to the <b>academic achievement</b> of the children I'm with.	Skills/ Knowledge	13%	43%	44%

Percents indicate the percent of parents to rank each statement at the top (rank 1 or rank 2), middle (rank 3, rank 4, rank 5, or rank 6), or bottom (rank 7 or rank 8).

best describe what parents value about play at PTM) are “provides opportunities for the children I’m with to have fun” and “enhances the imagination of the children I’m with,” while the two statements that rank at the bottom are “provides opportunities for the children I’m with to be active and burn energy” and “contributes to the academic achievement of the children I’m with” (i.e., least describe what parents value about play at PTM). Notice that no one category of statements (skills/knowledge, developmental, or experiential) dominated the top or bottom ranks, indicating that parents do indeed value play at PTM for a variety of reasons. Further, these rankings do not differ significantly by parents’ genders or ages or the ages of the children with whom they were visiting the museum.

RK&A also explored how parents perceive their role at PTM. To do so, RK&A presented parents with six statements that

**Table 4. Parents’ Ranking of Statements About Their Role at Please Touch Museum**

My role at Please Touch Museum is to...		Top Rank (1 or 2)	Middle Rank (3 or 4)	Bottom Rank (5 or 6)
Top Ranked Statements	<i>Play and have fun alongside</i> the children I’m with.	53%	32%	15%
	Allow the <i>children</i> I’m with to <i>direct/guide activities and play</i> .	41%	40%	20%
Middle Ranked Statements	<i>Facilitate the play</i> of the children I’m with.	26%	39%	35%
	<i>Learn alongside</i> the children I’m with.	21%	38%	41%
Bottom Ranked Statements	<i>Supervise the behavior</i> of the children I’m with.	31%	26%	43%
	Give the children I’m with the <i>freedom to play without adult intervention</i> .	27%	26%	47%

Percents indicate the percent of parents to rank each statement at the top (rank 1 or rank 2), middle (rank 3 or rank 4), or bottom (rank 5 or rank 6).

describe how they view their role at PTM and asked parents to put them in rank order; ties were not permitted.

Table 4 shows the six statements in rank order from top to bottom. The two statements that clearly ranked at the top (i.e., best describe how parents perceive their role at PTM) are “play and have fun alongside the children I’m with” and “allow the children I’m with to direct/guide activities and play,” while the two statements that rank at the bottom are “supervise the behavior of the children I’m with” and “give the children I’m with the freedom to play without adult intervention” (i.e., least describe how parents perceive their role at PTM). These rankings mostly replicate the ranks that PTM would like to see. Furthermore, responses to the statement “give the children I’m with the freedom to play without adult intervention” was the only ranking to differ significantly by visitor characteristics—parents 35 years and older and those without young children were most inclined to rank the statement highly.

### Timing and Tracking Observations

In timing and tracking observations, RK&A documented the behaviors of children (age 3 through 10) in three exhibition areas, as well as their interactions with accompanying parents. Observations show that most adult-child interactions were “hands-off” and supervisory, instructional, or disciplinary in nature. Only about one-third of adults played with their children and less than 10 percent of parents engaged in playful behavior with their child or knelt down to their child’s level to play. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, these findings contradict the role parents indicated in the standardized questionnaires.<sup>4</sup>

### Implications for Children’s Museums

Considering PTM findings along with relevant literature in the field, we see three main barriers to parental involvement in children’s museum experiences and discuss opportunities for addressing them.

### **1) Most parents lack a clear understanding of the learning benefits of play**

Findings from the PTM evaluation indicate that only a small portion of parents explicitly link learning with their children's play at PTM. While parents' perceptions of play are not erroneous or off-base, the museum hopes to develop these perceptions by bringing parents to deeper understandings about the value of play in children's museums. Ideally, parents also will recognize that fun and enjoyment are intrinsic motivators that make play an effective way for children to learn and that children's experiences playing at PTM encourage them to be successful life-long learners.

Research conducted by university researchers, in conjunction with Fisher-Price, Inc., provides more directed insight into parents' perceptions of play (Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, & Gryfe, 2008). The study, which explored parents' and experts' perceptions of various types of play for life-long learning, found that parents assigned more academic value to structured play activities (e.g., computer games that teach literacy skills) than to unstructured play activities (e.g., dramatic or role play) (Fisher et al., 2008). This is most interesting in light of the fact that play opportunities at children's museums like PTM are often unstructured. And, as Fisher et al. (2008) hypothesize, the academic value of unstructured play opportunities is not as transparent as that of structured play, since the learning is subtle and does not subscribe to the format of rote memorization and academic drills with which so many parents are familiar. In our opinion, this point is quite valid, and we recommend that children's museums work to explicitly associate unstructured play with learning, potentially by connecting the dots between play and the skills needed for academic success. By doing so, parents can begin to value play as a key contributor to the future success of their children.

### **2) Parents lack confidence in and knowledge of how to play with their children**

Helping parents recognize and understand the value of play is only half the battle; building the awareness, knowledge, and



Flight Fantasy Exhibition at Please Touch Museum *Photo courtesy of Please Touch Museum.*

skills parents need to effectively play with their child is also paramount. In the PTM evaluation, most parents indicated that their role at the museum is to play and have fun alongside their children and allow their children to direct/guide activities and play; however, most adult-child interactions observed were supervisory, instructional, or disciplinary in nature. It is not surprising

to see such a gap; researchers are always cautious of courtesy bias, which is when respondents provide responses they *think* are correct instead of the responses that most accurately represent their opinions or actions. But regardless of whether the responses were the result of courtesy bias or represent parents' true opinions, the responses beg the question: Why aren't parents behaving the way they think they should, or think they are, behaving?

One explanation is that parents lack the confidence, knowledge, or skills to facilitate play for their children. A study conducted by ZERO TO THREE supports this idea that parents are unsure of what strategies they should employ to best facilitate children's learning and development (ACM, 2005). Further, a study from the Chicago Children's Museum found that some parents expect staff to support them in these endeavors (Beaumont, 2008). Thus, one way children's museums could build adult visitors' awareness of and capacity to facilitate their children's play is to use frontline staff, trained in effective play facilitation, to engage with families in a way that demonstrates how to enter into and support a child's play scenario. Further, children's museums' programs (both on and offsite) can support and educate adult caregivers about effective play facilitation.

### 3) The nature, design, and content of children's museums may discourage parent involvement

Paradoxically, by their very nature as well as their names, children's museums may inadvertently send the signal that they are for children only, not families. Even though children's museums are opportune places for families to enter into play experiences *together*, exhibits are typically designed for small children and sometimes have the undesired effect of encouraging parents to step back and observe. In any museum, design can have a profound effect on the visitor. The way an exhibit looks can signal to visitors that it is intended for small children only (e.g., small space and low to the ground) or a small group of people to use together (e.g., a table top exhibit with room for gathering around); additionally, the content of the exhibition can suggest to parents that their assistance is not required or may even inhibit their child's experience. Much

has been written about family learning and what types of exhibits are most conducive to children and parents using exhibits together (Borun, Chambers, Dritsas, & Johnson, 1997; Ellenbogen, Luke, & Dierking, 2004; Puchner et al., 2001). For example, Borun et al. (1997) found that exhibits need to be “multi-sided, multi-use, accessible, multi-outcome, multi-modal, readable, and relevant” to enhance family learning at exhibits. And, in a small study at the Chicago Children’s Museum, researchers describe a “matchmaking” effect that happens when parents approach an exhibit with children (Gaskins, 2008). Findings showed that parents quickly assess an exhibit to determine whether there is a match between their children’s abilities and the demands of the exhibit and determine the degree to which they will interact with their child. Gaskins (2008) argues that exhibits should be designed to help adults quickly recognize their support role and provide enough information so that adults can scaffold their child’s experience. Establishing adult-child interaction as a primary goal of exhibit experiences and keeping these strategies in mind will go a long way to support parents in their roles as play facilitators.

## Conclusions

Reaching a deep understanding of the parent audiences that children’s museums serve is a crucial step in designing play experiences that result in the learning essential for children’s development. Before children’s museums can raise parents’ awareness of the value of play and build their capacity to facilitate play for their children, they need to step back and more fully explore the nuances of parents’ perceptions and practices of play. The PTM evaluation just scratches the surface. To further demystify our understanding of parents’ perceptions of play at children’s museums, we also must explore questions like: How do parents define playing with their children?; Do parents and children’s museums define play and learning in similar ways?; and, Are there play opportunities that parents see more learning potential in than others? Additionally, we agree with Fisher et al.’s (2008) research that suggests a need to explore parents’ perceptions of the types of learning that their children need to be exposed to in order to

be successful. Understanding parents' perceptions will equip children's museums with the information necessary to communicate the value of play, support parents in effective play facilitation, and design exhibits that encourage adult-child interaction. Ultimately, this will lead to more enriching play experiences for families.

### Notes

1. Much of the literature presented in the article focuses on play and learning in informal settings like museums. However, we would be remiss not to note that much of what we know about learning and play is grounded in the fields of childhood and cognitive development as well as educational and developmental psychology. Notable are the work of Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Jerome Bruner.
2. The formal report presented to PTM can be accessed at [www.informalscience.org](http://www.informalscience.org) (RK&A, 2010).
3. The description of the sample is from the questionnaire data, although the demographics from the interviews and observation are approximately equivalent. RK&A used a continuous random sampling method to survey visitors with the intent to capture a representative sample. Comparison between visitors who agreed to participate in the study and those who declined participation indicate that parents visiting the Museum without another adult and those with small children are underrepresented.
4. No significant differences were found between the adult-child interactions of adults visiting with one child versus more than one child. However, 71 percent of observed children were visiting with at least one other child. Potentially, adult-child interaction was higher in the toddler areas, which we did not observe.

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