

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.



Learn more about children's museums at www.ChildrensMuseums.org.

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