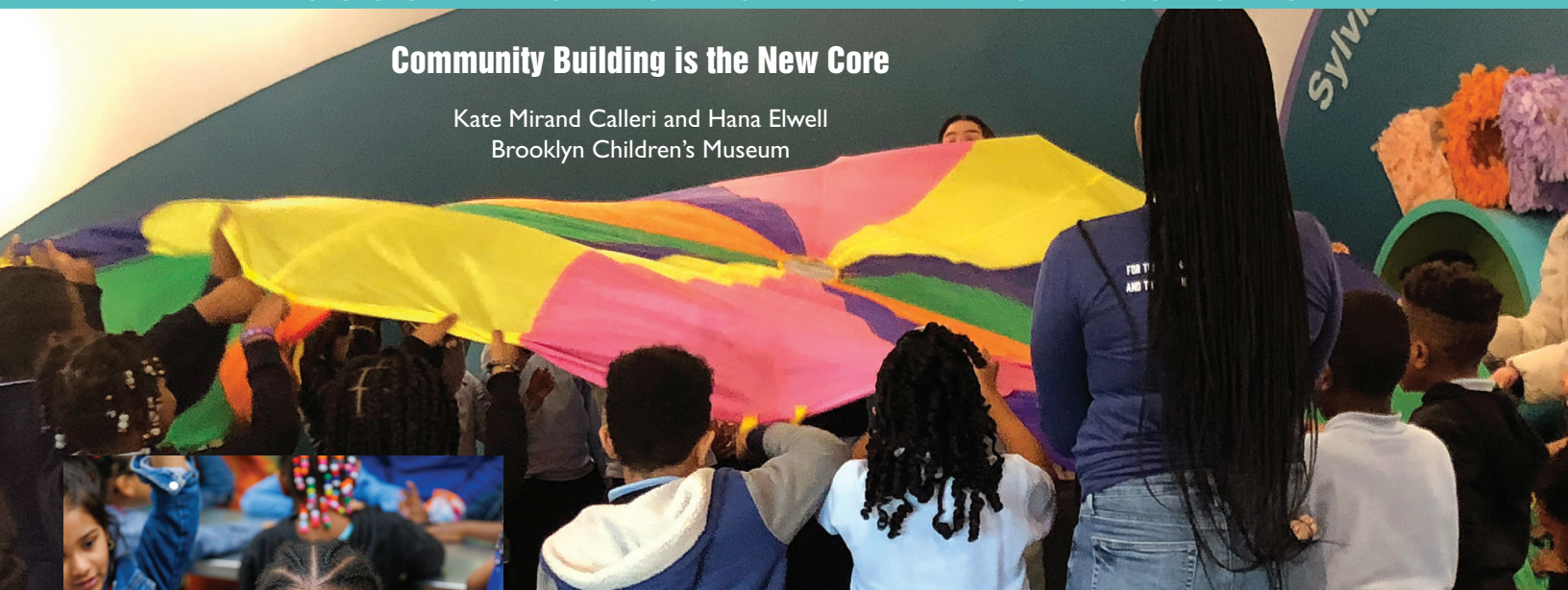




ASSOCIATION OF CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS

Community Building is the New Core

Kate Mirand Calleri and Hana Elwell
Brooklyn Children's Museum



...we are seeing new expressions and behaviors among our visitors of all ages.

What we have observed is part joy, part pent-up physical release, part social and community craving, and some bouts of real aggression—hard Brooklyn-style play like never before.

What has become clear through observing this shift is that some children, younger children in particular, are experiencing new social environments with people outside of their families, such as museums, for the first time.

Children have always played hard at Brooklyn Children's Museum (BCM). This has often become apparent in comparative conversations with other children's museums about measures to ensure safety or the number of consumable props needed, and physically manifest, in the traveling exhibits that have passed through BCM and traveled on with the imprint of heavy-handed visitor appreciation. This, however, was pre-pandemic. Now, we are seeing new expressions and behaviors among our visitors of all ages. What we have observed is part joy, part pent-up physical release, part social and community craving, and some bouts of real aggression—hard Brooklyn-style play like never before.

What has become clear through observing this shift is that some children, younger children in particular, are experiencing new social environments with people outside of their families, such as museums, for the first time. This is particularly apparent among

the children visiting on field trips. BCM has always been one of the first stops for children's first field trips, but the quantity of "firsts" now feels compounded. Additionally, we (among so many others in the education-related field), have seen a shift in how our visitors engage with one another.

Growing Ideas

With these observations in mind, drawing from research focused on the impact of the pandemic on early childhood behavior and development—and the challenge of "what kids need now," we have reviewed and renewed our approach to the programs we present. Specifically, we have redeveloped our school programs to increase an emphasis on cooperation and focus on community. All of our field trips offerings now include collaborative elements based on participatory actions that have children work in unison toward a single goal. For example,

Hand to Hand is a quarterly publication of the Association of Children's Museums (ACM). Opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of ACM.

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A Farewell Message

In 1993, Jeanne Finan, ACM president, asked me if I might be interested in taking over the organization's journal, *Hand to Hand*. They had just purchased it from its founder and wanted to grow it from a newsletter to a theme-focused publication to meet the increasing needs of this booming field. I had some experience working in art museums, running a non-profit, and starting a graphic design firm. I had also spent six years as a founding board member of a children's museum.

"Oh, and do you think you could manage InterActivity, too, until the new director starts?"

I said yes to both.

Learning by doing wasn't just a John Dewey principle, and it wasn't limited to children either. It was how many adults, me included, coming of age in the '60s and '70s, built their lives. This same mindset remains behind the origin of all children's museums: groups of educators, parents, funders, nonprofit leaders, philanthropists, and other community members get together and create one.

As the field exploded over the past thirty years, the Association of Children's Museums grew in response, adding staff, services, events, initiatives, and publications. *Hand to Hand* continued and grew along with it, identifying trends, issues, thought leaders, practices, and informa-

tion from related fields that supported the increasingly sophisticated—and emulated—learning-by-doing work done by children's museums.

A publication tuned in to its audience—museum practitioners—*Hand to Hand* stayed on track, through several content, format, and delivery iterations but with one common thread: the writers. Anyone familiar with my thank-you letters over the years will recognize this line, "Without writers like you, there would be no *Hand to Hand*, and that's a fact."

In my last issue here, I first and foremost want to thank the nearly one thousand volunteer writers and advisors I have worked with. A diverse range of voices—people from museums and other organizations all over the world have shared their expertise—sometimes multiple times—and stayed committed to the sometimes lengthy process and the product. Writers have been the joy (and occasionally the bane...) of my professional life.

Finally, a huge thank you to the ACM staff (I've worked with every one of them). This publication is not produced without the extensive guidance, thoughtful editorial contributions, and full support of the organization. Going forward, the *Hand to Hand* history is one many people can be proud of.

—Mary Maher

a new program called "Growing Ideas," is an ecology-based exploration in which students learn about some of the issues of climate change that impact our everyday lives. They get their hands in the dirt through a class planting relay project, and through this, physically embody one of the lesson's core vocabulary words: "collective action." The students observe the time it takes for one person at a time to fill a planter with dirt with a single spoon and compare how long it takes with many hands and many spoons working together. The lesson, like all our school program offerings, has core DOE alignment standards such as "Patterns," or "Cause and Effect," but more importantly, it shows through doing that working together or participating with others in a collective action, makes solving an issue more fun. Through this program, children are embodying the message that we all have

to move together to grow. In fact, this is a phrase that we repeat together throughout the planting exercise and we hope will resonate long after they leave the building.

Speak Up, Speak Out

With this redevelopment focus of community building action, our school programs now double down on social-emotional learning, and the children coming through our museum are feeling it. All of our group conversations and expressive art-making activities now have a core emphasis of social-emotional learning. We redeveloped a former program, "Listen Up," into "Speak Up, Speak Out," with an explicit focus on highlighting children as change makers who impact our communities every day. In "Speak Up, Speak Out," we encourage stu-

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Kids are more worried now: there are more suicides, more anxiety, more depression, greater stress and loneliness, etc. And what happens when that happens: kids act out! Some do it internally and some externally. It's not a big surprise.

Rebound: Helping Kids Regain Resilience in a Post-COVID World

Q&A with
Gene Beresin, MD, MA

Gene Beresin, MD, MA, is executive director of The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), a full professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School (HMS), and senior educator in child and adolescent psychiatry at MGH. He is also director of education of the MGH Division of Professional and Public Mental Health Education. As a clinician and educator with forty years of experience in working with youth, Dr. Beresin has focused on prevention, early intervention and treatment of children, teens and young adults. He has been a keynote speaker at local and international conferences, and is often called upon by media to weigh in on issues relevant to this vulnerable population and the unique impact of societal issues.

In July 2022, the National Center for Education Statistics the center revealed that more than 80% of U.S. public schools had reported that the pandemic had “negatively impacted student behavior and socio-emotional development.” 87% of public schools agreed strongly that the pandemic impacted student social-emotional development; 84% agreed that the pandemic had a negative impact on [behavior](#).

Among key findings, “the following student behaviors were most frequently reported as having increased during the 2021–22 school year (compared to a typical school year before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic) in part due to the pandemic and its lingering effects:

- Classroom disruptions increased 56%.
- Acts of disrespect increased 48%.
- Rowdiness episodes outside the classroom increased 48%.
- The prohibited use of electronic devices increased 42%.

In addition, the center reported increased absenteeism among teachers along with greater difficulty in finding substitutes. Public schools reported needing more support for student and/or staff mental health (79%), training on supporting students' socio-emotional development (70%), hiring of more staff (60%), and training on classroom management strategies (51%).

How would you describe kids' overall mindset today?

Kids are over-stressed, over-scheduled, and too pressured. But this was happening long before the pandemic. High school students in Finland spend about three and a half to four hours a day doing academic schoolwork and have almost no homework. Their school day includes group activities, projects, creative enterprises, and socio-emotional learning. In the United States, high school is 24/7 and with greater overall obligations, such as community service, sports, internships, and more in addition to excellence in academics. There is no time to just hang out with friends, develop social skills, or just relax and, most of all, process the wealth of experiences they have. And that pressure cooker schedule starts in elementary school.

Kids aren't bored anymore, they're stressed. They're also worried about things they see in the media. A lot of blame gets placed on digital media—from many sources who increasingly blame digital media for many things. Of course, bad things like cyber-bullying do happen on digital media. But media is a double-edged sword. It also *helps* kids during stress. It helps them connect with friends and resources. It helps them stay in touch. Further, it has become an invaluable resource for doing evidence-based research. So, the mixed bag of media is only one factor behind kids' increased stress levels, and it was going on pre-pandemic, too. Of particular concern is the overuse and dependence on social media that brings with it high levels of drama.

The COVID pandemic contributed to an already brewing storm.

What effects has the three-year pandemic had on kids' mental health?

In a November 2021 Pew *Stateline* [article](#) (“COVID Harmed Kids' Mental Health—And Schools Are Feeling It”), author Christine Vestal stated that, “Last month, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association [declared](#) that the pandemic-related decline in child and adolescent mental health has become a national emergency.” (This article also noted that we are currently in a national mental health crisis, not just from the pandemic, but for multiple other reasons.) This declaration was echoed and amplified by the [Surgeon General's Report: Protecting Youth Mental Health](#).

Since then, billions of dollars have been allocated to create new—or improve existing—mental health programs for children and adolescents.

Among younger kids, pandemic-mandated school closures resulted in a lack of routine. But more importantly, 140,000 caregivers were lost to COVID nationally: too many people around kids have died. To compound the problem, there is a shortage of school counselors, which aligns with the national workforce shortage.

Kids are more worried now: there are more suicides, more anxiety, more depression, greater stress and loneliness, etc. And what happens when that happens: kids act out! Some do it internally and some externally. It's not a big surprise.

What about learning loss—academic and socio-emotional?

There is no learning or socio-emotional loss. There is learning and socio-emotional *delay*! The brain is built with about 100 billion neurons, each with 10,000 connections; it is constantly changing and adapting. Kids can catch up. The beauty of the brain is what is known as “plasticity”—the ability to modify the neuronal connections, and by doing so, catch up on missed developmental processes.

Look at England in World War II. Kids didn't go to school for four years! The country was being bombed. Did they worry about socio-emotional learning then? No, they worried about being killed by the Nazis. My mother, who died two years ago at the age of 102, lived through the Great Depression and WWII. She and her family survived and kept learning. It's not like we haven't been exposed to catastrophes before. But was there trauma? Yes. PTSD? Yes. High ACE ([Adverse Childhood Experiences](#)) scores? Yes. But were the people living through these terrible times permanently set back? NOPE.

Teachers have a high dose of stress and pressure. They keep hearing from many parents, caregivers and supervisors, “Your kids have fallen behind! You have to help them catch up NOW!” And there are similarities between classrooms and museums: teachers, children's museum staff, librarians, school counselors, etc. are all getting hammered with the same message: “We have to help kids catch up!” But it's not up to teachers, museum workers, librarians, and counselors to “fix it.” We all have to help kids together. And catching up takes different amounts of time and activities for different kids. We need to assess what each child needs and find ways to foster remediation for all sorts of developmental delays. One size does not fit all.

Frankly, I and the young people I talk with are worried about their academic futures, but perhaps are more worried now about sexual assault, mass shootings, climate change, racism, disparities of other marginalized people (e.g., immigrants, LGBTQIA+ young people), cyber-bullying, and scandalous politicians (you'd get thrown out of school for saying or doing things that some politicians now say and do) than we are about what the pandemic has done. The

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pandemic (we hope) is over, but the social forces our kids are experiencing are escalating. Our young people are generally insecure in a world that has become unsafe to most.

So, what can we do to mitigate social/emotional learning delay?

In a Clay Center [podcast](#), Dr. Stuart Ablon, director of Think: Kids at Massachusetts General Hospital, talked about some strategies to help parents and their kids do the best they can right now. A huge part of this is changing our mindset to remember that challenging behavior is about lack of skill, not will—none of us act out on purpose. Kids behave well if they can, and so do parents. All kids want approval. It's just that many cannot perform the way their parents, caregivers, and teachers wish they could. They get frustrated, and some act out.

Schools need more breaks, throughout the day and the entire school year. But in every setting where kids are acting out, we need more behavioral interventions—parents, teachers, older students have to step in.

Parents need to keep up with what their kids are doing online. Of course, parents are more stressed now than before the pandemic. They're more worried about their kids' socio-emotional health than ever before—which is great! That's a silver lining of the pandemic. We're glad they're concerned about it.

Do you have any suggestions for children's museums, many of whom are struggling with escalating behavioral issues among kids and adults post-pandemic?

To minimize behavioral problems among kids or adults in children's museums, prepare visitors for what to expect either before they come to the museum, or at least before they enter the exhibits. A brief

orientation for newly arrived visitors could touch on key points such as “be respectful to kids and staff, use your indoor voice, no name-calling, there are plenty of exhibits, take your time going through the museum,” etc. Many children's museums already post information about what to expect during field trip or family visits on their websites.

Be clear and direct about your expectations. Post rules or standards of behavior: if you can't behave, you will be asked to leave. Museums could work together to produce a video or print materials, such as posters, for use in all museums that orient/prepare visitors for the experience: Parents/caregivers, here are the requirements—your job is to keep your kids under control. We're relying on you to do this.

And if you're really having problems getting visitors to cooperate with posted rules, you could do what Mass General has successfully done: look for retired law enforcement or security officers or other caring, authoritative (not authoritarian) adults in your community and say you'd like some help. Hire them or engage them as volunteers. Their job is not to be a “museum police officer,” but rather one trained (and this is super-important!) to provide a sense of control, to be skilled in de-escalation of behavior, to gently remind kids and adults of their personal responsibilities in the museum in a kind but clear way. You might be surprised at how many are available and interested. Or try to enlist some high school juniors, seniors, or college students as volunteers. Many younger kids often respond well to the right teenagers or young adults. They will need some training in management of aggressive behavior, and many retired officers are experts in a number of proven methods, such as [MOAB](#) or [AVADE](#).

Bottom line? No one thing will solve every problem. Five percent of all people—kids, adults, students, museum visitors, etc.—will act out for various reasons. Children's museum staff's job in working with all kids and their families is to diffuse the occasional bad situations when they arise. De-escalation training, such as MOAB Training, helps. The last thing you need to do in a charged encounter is escalate the stress. But grounded, genuine responses like “I'm here to help you and your kids have a great time,” can go a long way to get things back on track in these volatile times. 🌸



Wakanheza

Training: 20 Years Old and More Relevant Than Ever

Two Museums Share Their Stories

WHAT IS WAKANHEZA?

Wakanheza is built around six principles which help people remove barriers that prevent them from acting and provide a process that helps people manage themselves in stressful situations. It starts with

empathizing with parents and the stress they can feel when taking their children out in public. Parents do not have control over public environments and their parenting skills are often on display for everyone to see and judge. This can make parents feel powerless and sometimes they may feel the

Six principles form the basis for the Wakanheza Project violence-prevention training program, and can be used to help museum staff build authentic connections:

Environment
Bias
Empathy
Culture
Power
Connection

need to regain control quickly and often physically. The key is to approach these situations without judgment, acknowledging our own biases, and focusing on how to help parents feel less stress, instead of labeling their behaviors as “bad” or “wrong.”

By doing this, we can assist families across cultures and act in the moment—right here at the museum—to make our visitors’ experiences more positive and welcoming.

2023: Principles Still Work with Visitors; Modified Training Works for New Staff

Vickie Van Ness
Minnesota Children’s Museum

It was approaching lunchtime at the museum. I was in the lobby with several visitors when I heard children crying. I looked up and saw a woman coming down the stairs, holding the hands of two preschoolers. While it is common for staff to see and hear children crying when they need to stop their play and leave the museum, several of the visitors in the lobby turned to look as the woman rushed by. Suddenly she stopped, picked up each child and set them firmly on the window bench. She took a deep breath, shook her finger at them, and shouted, “Stop! Stop it now!” The lobby went silent. Now all eyes were on her.

Wakanheza

Minnesota Children’s Museum

Situations like this—where parents feel overwhelmed, frustrated, or embarrassed by their children’s behavior—happen every day at Minnesota Children’s Museum. In 2003, frontline managers recognized that to best serve our visitors, all visitor assistants working the front lines needed better tools and strategies to assist and support parents when these situations arose. We found what we were looking for in the Wakanheza Project, a community initiative developed by

Ramsey County Child Protection in St. Paul.

Wakanheza, the Dakota word for “child,” literally translates to “sacred being.” The Wakanheza vision holds that by supporting and assisting parents, we can make our communities more welcoming for families and decrease instances of child abuse. The project’s principles and strategies have universal application in building authentic social connections, creating welcoming environments, and reducing stressful situations for employees, visitors, and our community. In 2003, a museum staff training was developed by project partners; in 2006, the Association of Children’s Museums awarded the project a Promising Practice Award followed by its replication award the following year.

How Are the Principles Applied?

Strategies for intervening and helping parents are varied and simple. Here are just a few examples from staff:





In 2003, frontline managers recognized that to best serve our visitors, all visitor assistants working the front lines needed better tools and strategies to assist and support parents when these situations arose. We found what we were looking for in the Wakanheza Project, a community initiative developed by Ramsey County Child Protection in St. Paul.

- At our box office, families are met by visitor assistants (VA) ready with puppets and other props to keep kids engaged while waiting in line, thereby modifying the environment to make things easier for the parents.

- Sometimes adults get frustrated and embarrassed over losing quarters when they try to use our lockers. VAs are quick to empathize (“Those lockers can be tricky sometimes.”) and bring refund quarters to assist the visitors in securing their items.

- Ami, a visitor assistant who is also a mom, shares stories with adults about times her own children made a mess or had a meltdown in public. By doing so she forms a connection with the parents, who can then see that they are not being judged and are not alone.

- Once a toddler laid down at the entrance of the gallery and started having a tantrum because they realized they had worn the “wrong” shoes. VA Aaron smiled and commented to the parent, “Just another Tuesday at the museum!” This brief comment not only normalized the situation for the parent, but also elicited head nods of understanding from other parents in the area who had “been there” themselves.

Regarding my story about the frustrated mother of two crying preschoolers, I decided to use a Wakanheza distraction strategy to de-escalate the situation. I pretended to look around for another visitor’s lost stuffed rabbit. As I approached the woman and her two children, I asked if I could peak behind them in the windowsill to see if the much-loved lost bunny was there. The woman’s

shoulders dropped, she smiled a little, and started to help me search. She even encouraged her children to help. Her situation quickly de-escalated. By asking for her help, I had given her a little power at a time when she felt powerless. And she had time to take a breath.


Wakanheza’s Increased Relevance in Post-Pandemic Museums

The pandemic’s impact has left lasting changes to how we staff, supervise, and meet visitor needs. Our workforce at the museum is leaner than in the past due to financial constraints and an incredibly tight labor market. Our new staff are often less experienced and need more support and skill-building than in the past. And our families and staff need the support Wakanheza offers now more than ever.



Coming out of the pandemic, we have simplified operations and modified staff training to align with our more limited time and resources. We shortened the training

time from a three-to-four-hour workshop and tweaked the delivery method by creating a twenty-five-minute video introduction to Wakanheza that new staff view a few weeks after joining the team. Soon we plan to hold one-hour practice sessions from time to time, where small groups of staff can discuss and role-play visitor scenarios, and then respond using Wakanheza strategies.

But training is only a starting point. Truly embedding Wakanheza into our museum culture required a commitment to talking about it often, setting aside biases and judgments, and striving to put ourselves in our visitors’ shoes every day. The result is a mindset that permeates the organization, and creates staff who empathize with parents, approach challenging situations without judgment, and assume good intent in others, as we take strides together to make our museum and our community more welcoming to families. 

Vickie Van Ness is visitor services manager at Minnesota Children’s Museum in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Wakanheza Creates a Culture of Empathy

Kim Stull
DuPage Children's Museum

As we all return to our “normal” patterns of behavior and attendance begins to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic disruption, meeting with colleagues from around the country again in person has been so good. Yet, I repeatedly hear stories of unusually high rates of misbehavior happening with both children and adults in their museums. Many have asked how the kids at DuPage Children's Museum (DCM) are behaving, and I had to really think through my answer.

Wakanheza

DuPage
Children's
Museum



Welcome Back

Welcoming groups of children back to the museum for the first time took place in the summer of 2021. We hosted our usual Tinkering Camp, but this time outside with COVID protocols in place. Within a few hours, it became clear: these children did

not know how to behave in a group environment! They had difficulty taking direction; they were all talking at the same time; some kids didn't know how to respect other people's personal space. Our teams could have been frustrated or angry, demanded that kids listen to them, or loudly enforced *the rules!* Instead, they responded with em-

WAKANHEZA IN REAL TIME

A guest approaches a staff member, busy cleaning manipulatives while watching guests on the museum floor during a busy day.

Guest: “I have to tell you I'm very disappointed in our visit today.”

The staff member stops what they're doing, takes a moment to reset themselves so their body language is focused on the guest and they can remember positive intent. “Hi, I'm Cassie. I know you came to have fun with your little ones today. Can you tell me more about your experience?”

Guest: “Yes, I came with my grandchildren and it's extremely busy. We have nowhere to play and there are too many students here from these field trips. This is ridiculous!” The guest appears visibly upset, they are frowning and waving their hands while they talk.

Staff member listens actively without interruption and affirms understanding. “I understand that it's a busier day today than expected and you haven't been able to find a comfortable place to play with your children.” Pause for acknowledgement.

Guest: “Yes, exactly. We can't find anything to do here with all of these field trip students playing all over the place.”

Staff Member: “That sounds frustrating. I would like to help you find a quieter place to play. Field trips are an important way of increasing access to the museum for students who may not otherwise be able to visit. They are so excited for their visit that it can sometimes be overwhelming for guests who anticipate a quieter visit. Have you visited our Young Explorer areas? I can also call my team members to see if they can identify a less busy area of the museum.”

Guest: “Thank you. I really wish you had a members-only time or a day of the week when field trips aren't allowed. It's just disappointing when we come to have fun and my little ones are overwhelmed.”

Staff Member: “I understand. I would be happy to help you leave a comment card for leadership if you are interested, we always appreciate feedback. If possible, I recommend visiting the museum on weekday afternoons or joining us for a Friday evening when the museum is less busy and we generally don't have field trips booked.” Continues to assist guests in finding an alternative space to play and/or leave a comment card., or, if guest remains dissatisfied, offers free passes to return at another, less crowded time.



The camp leaders realized that some children needed more one-on-one time than expected, and they adapted by adjusting group size and camp staff assignments to accommodate the children. Learning how to use a saw was not the most important skill achieved that summer. Rather, after spending so much of their lives in various pandemic-isolated or restricted environments, children now immersed in a collaborative environment practiced much needed life skills: communicating, sharing, and taking turns.

pathy and flexibility, traits that have become ingrained in DCM's institutional culture based on principles the museum adopted from the Wakanheza Project well over twelve years ago.

For some of the camp's four and five year olds, it was their first time in a group experience with other children. They needed time to practice some of their rusty social-emotional skills. All staff, including new hires, embraced the museum's empathetic mindset, and followed the examples set by Dustin Thacker, DCM's arts and maker specialist. Dustin knew how to redirect, be exceptionally flexible, and support a little bit of randomness without worrying about whether anyone ever really finished the entire camp curriculum (DCM has always focused on process versus product). The camp leaders realized that some children needed more one-on-one time than expected, and they adapted by adjusting group size and camp staff assignments to accommodate the children. Learning how to use a saw was not the most important skill achieved that summer. Rather, after spending so much of their lives in various pandemic-isolated or restricted environments, children now immersed in a collaborative environment practiced much needed life skills: communicating, sharing, and taking turns.

The Wakanheza Way

Colleagues in other museums and our team at DCM have indeed observed some shocking adult misbehavior at times (and boy, we have heard some stories!). We all have our theories about why it is happening, but I will leave diagnoses to the professionals. What museum professionals need to do is teach our teams how to cope, manage, deflect, and empathize with the adults who seem to have lost some of their abilities to regulate their own behavior.

DuPage Children's Museum had adopted the Wakanheza principles when the Minnesota Children's Museum first started offering the training in 2006. We found the de-escalation strategies to be particularly important in our public setting.


Over the years, the Wakanheza principles along with training on general customer service de-escalation strategies have helped our teams deal in the moment with a lot of tough situation, including recent and atypical post-pandemic ones. Cassie Coffey, senior guest experience manager, trains her team to use the following four steps to create positive interactions.

1) Remember positive intention: assume guests arrive looking for a fun experience with their family; don't anticipate negativity.

2) Be an active listener: don't anticipate your own response. It is difficult to listen properly when you are working on your own defense.

3) Affirm your understanding of what guests say by repeating back what you have heard without passing judgement.

4) Look for a solution and/or provide an explanation. Avoid placing blame on anyone or negating their experience. (Although our team is empowered to do as much solution-building as possible, they also know when to contact a manager if a satisfactory one is not found.)

As we rebuild and stabilize our front-line team, DCM trainings will continue to provide staff with both conflict resolution skills and Wakanheza-based principles and strategies. Our staff, our museums, and the world seem to need this very thoughtful and deeply empathic program right now. 

Kim Stull began her career at the DuPage Children's Museum in Naperville, Illinois, as museum floor manager in 2001. Over the years, as the museum sought a good balance between programs, exhibits, and the guest experience, she changed positions and currently serves as chief of building and making.

When my child was in second grade, I chaperoned a field trip to The Children's Museum of Indianapolis (The Children's Museum). At the museum where I had worked for over a decade, and as a museum educator to boot, I was confident in my abilities to be a model chaperone. My group of second graders were going to demonstrate how they could navigate a large museum and come away with newfound skills and knowledge. The result? Well, I didn't lose anyone, everyone ate lunch, and we made it to our program on time.

Despite my years working in the school programs department, chaperoning my own child's field trip was an immense learning experience. It opened my eyes to the assumptions we often make about chaperones, and the unique relationship between a parent chaperone and a field trip group.

A child's excitement builds long before they enter a museum. My fellow chaperones and I met the second graders in their school classroom and rode the school bus to the museum. The energy level of the students was palpable. The students' excitement and energy that we observe as floor or education staff begins long before students set foot in our institutions. Children know it's a day free from math problems and spelling words. Add on the excitement of having thirty minutes to talk with your bestie on the bus, and knowing that your parent had to pack a brown bag lunch—which means subtract the carrots and add the Doritos! Some kids may have only heard about The Children's Museum, or seen the ads on TV, and now it's their first chance to visit. The anticipation is immense; these little bodies are bursting with excitement.

Children rely on prior knowledge to make decisions about what to do in a space. In my field trip group, the children's experiences with the museum ranged from



The Chaperone Perspective: Field Trip Allies

Becky Wolfe

The Children's Museum of Indianapolis

How can we support chaperones as well as students? In our post-pandemic world, it's imperative to recognize that chaperones, not just students, have missed important field trip experiences. These same chaperones may have been reluctant to bring their families to a museum, so the environment is very new to them, too.

those of my child, who has grown up in the museum, to first-time visitors. For many children, a school field trip is a museum entry point. The first-timers in my group bounced like ping pong balls from exhibit to exhibit. Children use prior knowledge and experiences to help them decide how to interact with a museum exhibit. Children's museums create bright, colorful, and immersive spaces. First-time visiting students compare them to ones where they have been before—indoor bounce houses, indoor playgrounds—and behave based on that frame of reference.

Parent chaperones may also be new to the museum; most have just met the students on the day of the trip. As a full-time working parent, the opportunities to volunteer in my child's classroom were limited to field trips and the occasional class party. I knew only a handful of students in the class, none of whom were in my field trip group. The students were learning my name, and I was learning theirs. As a parent taking my child to the museum, I am able to channel detailed information about my child's

interests, personality, and quirks to guide the museum visit. A field trip chaperone doesn't have the same level of understanding about most of the children they're working with.

A common frustration I hear from floor staff is that chaperones don't correct problematic student behaviors. Parent chaperones are often reluctant to discipline a child they don't know. Or,

frequently, teachers, thrilled to get any chaperones at all, fail to provide the behavior expectations and strategies they use to manage students. One way to support chaperones is to model how to redirect a child. (It may also help to stave off problems by encouraging teachers to communicate expectations before the field trip.)

Model how to use a museum. One of my colleagues recently shared a school group interaction she hoped to share with chaperones. Noticing an inquisitive group of students in our dinosaur exhibit, the staff member initiated conversation, asking questions that emphasized observing the fossils. An important piece of this interaction was the staff member's willingness to start a conversation with an energetic bunch of students. They created a moment for students to pause and interact with the exhibit, demonstrated that museum staff—and chaperones—aren't just in an exhibit to correct behavior, but are learning resources as well, and gave chaperones some simple tools to help guide the visit.

How can we support chaperones as well as students? In our post-pandemic world, it's imperative to recognize that chaperones, not just students, have missed important field trip experiences. These same chaperones may have been reluctant to bring their families to a museum, so the environment is very new to them, too. At The Children's Museum, we are implementing a proactive approach, and considering the chaperone/student dynamic.



How can we support chaperones as well as students? In our post-pandemic world, it's imperative to recognize that chaperones, not just students, have missed important field trip experiences. These same chaperones may have been reluctant to bring their families to a museum, so the environment is very new to them, too.

Example #1:

Navigating difficult content

During the fall of 2022, The Children's Museum hosted an exhibit for middle school students about Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old Chicago boy who was the victim of a racially-motivated abduction and murder in Mississippi in 1955. The exhibit content, which included racial violence, was difficult to process. We knew that middle-school-aged children could have a variety of emotions or responses to this tragic but important story, and we wanted to help them begin to process it before they boarded the bus back to school. Rather than expect chaperones to navigate this potentially charged process with children they don't know, our team created a school group reflection activity.

Through a series of ten prompts spaced out on mobile whiteboards in a classroom just off the exhibit gallery, students were encouraged to write down their responses, anonymously, on sticky notes. The notes posted displayed a range of emotions and thoughts and provided opportunities for student voice and reflection without the fear of judgement. By acknowledging the limits of new and possibly awkward student/chaperone relationships, we supported both the students and the chaperones during the experience.

Example #2:

Providing tools to guide student engagement

As an institution that focuses on family learning, we believe that the adults should have a positive experience as well. Through this lens we created materials for chaperones to use in our newly renovated *Dinosphere* exhibit. We wanted to create activities directly connected to the exhibit and that could be easily explained to students without requiring chaperones to keep track of individual worksheets. The results? A comic book and a Who Am I? game.

The comic book introduces different exhibit areas, using simple facts, inquiry questions, and a few jokes. Teachers receive an email prior to the field trip, with a link to request a book. Books are also provided to chaperones when the groups arrive. Students are encouraged to read the book together before they arrive or as they walk through the exhibit, or the chaperones can read it aloud to their group. Inquiry questions within the text guide students to make observations about the species.

The Who Am I? game is based on a key science curriculum standard for elementary ages: exploring the physical features of plants and animals. Students are given a set of cards, each card containing a set of clues that highlight the physical features of prehistoric species in the exhibit. Using ob-

servations skills combined with exhibit label text, students are able to identify the species and check their answers. This highly visual format is fun for the kids and provides their chaperones with a structured experience to help guide their group.

Pulling it All Together

Moving forward, we will continue to be advocates for school group chaperones, building upon our experiences as both museum educators and parents. A positive field trip experience will stick with a child throughout their school career. By supporting chaperones, and understanding the critical role that they play, we can support a lifetime of learning. 🐾

Becky Wolfe is director of school programs and educational resources at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis in Indianapolis, Indiana.

It is said that “inclusion means not just being invited to the dance, but asked to dance.” At the Creative Discovery Museum (CDM), we create an adaptable environment where every learner can engage at their own ability level. For some, that may look like progression from shorter visits to longer—a ten-minute visit to start, builds up to a whole hour (or more).

Since the great shut down, we have seen changes in some children’s and families’ ability to function in social settings. For some—especially our youngest learners—the environment can be too much to handle. In some instances, this can lead to behaviors incongruent with a children’s museum.

Inclusive practices designed to promote learning and enjoyment for children with special needs can be beneficial for all children. Furthermore, these practices are equally valuable in supporting caregivers during museum visits in today’s stressful world.

The Iceberg Model

Each learner brings unique knowledge, prior experiences, and varied abilities. Behavior is a manifestation of this combina-



A Museum, an Iceberg, a Toolbox: Toward a More Inclusive Experience for All Visitors

Claire Stockman and Suzanne Van Ness
Creative Discovery Museum

tion plus other invisible factors—some we can influence, and others we can’t. Some learners have difficulty regulating their attention, body movements, and emotions in our highly stimulating environment. While the wide variety and unpredictable nature of challenging behaviors can be surprising, we train all staff in specific strategies so that all guests can be included in exploring, innovating, creating, and playing in the museum.

Our training strategies offer tools for meeting guests at their point of dysregulation. Our model suggests thinking about

behaviors through the lens of an iceberg: 10% of probable causes are visible above the waterline, 90% are hidden below it. Outward expressions of dysregulation, from screaming and running to hiding underneath a table, or more subtle manifestations like monosyllabic

answers to questions or invitations, are visible and prevent the guest from full engagement.

We usually see behavior in response to a stimulus, such as when a child enters the museum with wide, distrusting eyes and is soon screaming with their hands covering their eyes. When staff are trained to visualize behaviors through the iceberg analogy they are better able to check their own immediate emotional response in order to choose their *best* response, one that meets the guest where they are and makes space for their regulation needs.

How do we handle a visibly frightened young guest? Staff will gently recommend a less stimulating place in the museum where she and her caregiver can take a break until she’s ready for more sensory input. We don’t try to diagnose why she is struggling. Our primary goal is that this child has a successful visit where she is comfortable enough to engage with the museum to the fullest extent of her abilities.

In support of that goal, the museum environment is designed to be conducive to reaching a level of regulation that allows her to engage with her caregiver and possibly even peer learners. The museum cultivates strong family learning experiences as well as naturally occurring “relational play.” Formerly a staple of childhood but often missing from today’s world, relational play most simply means children playing with other children.

Partnerships Broaden Inclusivity and Develop Better Tools to Work with All Learners

In 2011 Jayne Griffin, the museum’s former education leader, discovered training opportunities for working with exceptional learners at The Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders (TRIAD) at Vanderbilt University’s Kennedy Center. A former classroom teacher, Jayne always kept a keen eye out for pro-



Staff, trained to be mindful of word choice when communicating with guests, always phrase redirection positively. For example, instead of saying, “No running in the museum,” we say, “Show me your walking feet.”

We also use the “First, then” communications strategy when preparing guests for transitions between exhibits or activities. One time, when our evaluation manager was collecting data on the museum floor, a child who participates in one of our inclusion programs demanded to be taken upstairs to another exhibit. The manager spotted the child’s mother with a younger sibling and said, “I’m busy right now but mom is going to finish up in that exhibit with your sister, then she can take you upstairs.”

We shared the “First, then” strategy with the mom. Later, when her child participated in another program where we used that language, the child said, “You’ve been talking to my mom, haven’t you?” The mother had adopted “First, then” language at home!

professional learning opportunities, not just for administrative staff, but for floor staff as well. She knew that organizational change could only be achieved when staff at all levels were trained.

Vanderbilt's training opportunities led Jayne and her team to engage in individualized coaching from TRIAD's All-Access Inclusion Network (AAIN). In collaboration with AAIN advisors, Jayne and CDM's out-of-school time and inclusion manager evaluated the museum's level of inclusivity from alignment to mission, to communicating with the public, to embedding expectations into staff onboarding. Jointly, they developed goals and processes—still used today—for training the museum's floor staff to interact more effectively with children with learning differences. For example, if a museum educator observes a dysregulated child, they are able to offer the caregiver a choice of support (a quiet space, a sensory bag, or tickets to try again another day), and communicate with the caregiver in a way that makes it clear that we want their child here and that we have tools and expertise to support their visit.

Later, through a partnership developed with the occupational therapy (OT) department at the University of Tennessee Chattanooga, OT doctoral students interned with the CDM team to further embed inclusion practices into floor staff functions by creating tangible tools, like visual schedules, picture cards, and internal handbooks. Inclusion, both in principle and in practice, strongly influences approaches to learning, programming, and guest interactions.

Over several years, the OT interns collaborated with CDM staff to expand existing tools and show avenues for further alignment to the AAIN goals, pushing the organizational mindset even further toward inclusivity. With them, we developed “social stories,” a two-hour training about behaviors and our capacity to address them in the museum environment. We also developed a host of specific tools—both physical and conceptual—that are effective when working with neurodiverse children, to be sure, but equally useful in helping any child who may be having difficulty with self-regulation while visiting the museum.

CAMP STAFF OBSERVATIONS

Camp partners shared some of the issues they faced and some of the observations they made about the campers and families they worked with during summer 2022.

- Children were less likely to know how to self-regulate in group settings and new environments away from home.
- Parents were unable to communicate a learner's needs and/or were waiting for formal evaluations conducted by the school system. During COVID, children's unidentified needs were often exacerbated in isolation, and access to services dried-up. Also, with the boom in homeschooling/unschooling, parents didn't have norms for comparison to red-flag delays and atypical behaviors. The museum felt the overall impact of unidentified kids who were not receiving interventions.
- Summer camp staffing was affected by large-scale staff shortages; most staff were new, lacking the same level of experience once required; they had fewer “tools in their toolbox.”

Museum Trains Summer Camp Staff to Help Create an Ecosystem Where All Children Thrive

As programs re-opened after the pandemic, partner organizations shared stories of seasonal camp staff, some newly hired, feeling totally unprepared to accommodate children experiencing dysregulation. They were surprised by learners with no formal diagnoses who had trouble adapting to stimulating environments. In 2021, with local grant support, we invited The Chattanooga Camp Leaders Council to learn with us in hopes of creating an ecosystem in which more children could experience camp success. (“Camp success” means being able to stay the whole camp day or for incrementally increasing amounts of time each day; engage in camp activities, with support, if needed; and connect with peers.) In addition, prior to the 2022 summer camp season, we reached out to other informal education agencies who facilitate summer camp programs throughout the region and offered to train their front-line staff with the tools and mental models we had developed for the museum. Our two-hour sessions, facilitated at CDM, the local zoo, and the aquarium, trained staff for rock climbing camp, sleep-away camp, and camps for children with Down Syndrome.

We were surprised at the hunger for strategies and tools that work! In our training sessions focused on the iceberg model, camp staff learned new ways of thinking about behavior and they gained practical training tools, such as picture schedules and “if...then” language. As a result, staff felt better able to work with all children, thereby increasing inclusion at their sites. Children were able to spend increasing amounts of time in stimulating environments in week-long camps. Staff confidence contributed to job satisfaction, and we heard anecdotal reports of the strategies being used in parenting settings and K-5 classrooms once school resumed. Our summer camp training and inclusion strategies are making ripples as our community becomes, one ripple at a time, more inclusive for all children.

Staff Trained to Respond to All Learners with Compassion and Patience

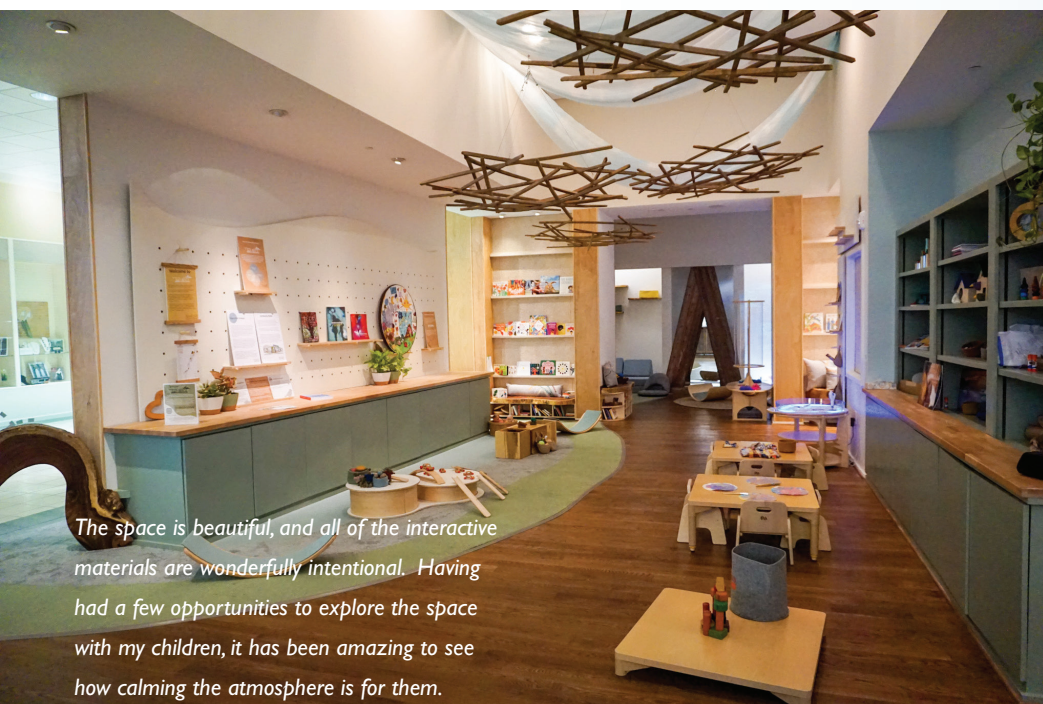
After the more than ten years of this inclusion training program, staff show increased awareness of the full range of inclusivity and demonstrate the capacity to respond to accommodate all learners. Partner organizations in our summer camp training cohort report that their seasonal staff feel more confident and capable in creating environments where more campers can be successful. They have more “tools in their toolbox” now and a more informed mental bandwidth to focus on solutions.

What began as an approach to working with exceptional learners, through the lens of inclusion, has expanded as an approach to working with all children. Behaviors once viewed as difficult and in need of immediate redirection are now seen in light of the iceberg model—there's a lot more going on beneath the surface of what you see. You will never know all the details behind a child's actions, but you can learn to respond intentionally with compassion and patience. The magic of this training's impact is that it starts with a single staff member learning to view a learner as an individual and being supplied with the tools to support them.

Claire Stockman is vice president of education and Suzanne Ness is director of programs at the Creative Discovery Museum in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Design for Well-Being: Fostering Empathy, Kindness, and Connection

Melanie Hatz Levinson and Samantha Shannon, Kidzu Children's Museum; Brad Burns, AIA, Gensler



The space is beautiful, and all of the interactive materials are wonderfully intentional. Having had a few opportunities to explore the space with my children, it has been amazing to see how calming the atmosphere is for them.

My normally high-energy four-year-old was moved to quietly investigate the different areas. I was so impressed with how the toys inspired him to show empathy not only to the toys but also to the other children playing in the space. He loved snuggling with the soft crocheted birds and pushing the dolls on the swings.

— Nest Caregiver, August 2022

each other in these environments, helping to add longevity to exhibit elements and providing spaces conducive to socio-emotional growth and healing.

We don't have the panacea to this post-COVID behavioral phenomenon, but we offer a case study of the *Nest*: the museum's newest early learning environment for infants, toddlers, and their caregivers, that opened 2022.

Case Study: The Nest

The *Nest* is grounded in the Reggio Emilia philosophy, which insists that children have a right to beautiful spaces and that a physical space has the power to foster “encounters, communication, and relationships.” Crucial elements of the learning experience, the design and aesthetic of Reggio-inspired environments use natural elements—plants, mirrors, big windows, natural light, and a muted color palette—and open-ended materials to encourage real-life interactions. In these spaces for young children, everything is at their level and sized for their bodies to allow for healthy risk-taking and the freedom to explore.

The Reggio philosophy values children and caregivers as partners and collaborators and seeks to create sustainable environments that are co-curated with their communities and responsive to their needs. Designers and

educators consider the specific context, interests, and abilities of a community when planning and facilitating a space. The *Nest's* responsiveness and flexibility, combined with our educators' deep understanding of child development and respect for the different ways children learn, foster the empathetic behavior we are seeing in this exhibit, which counters the trend of destructive and challenging behavior often seen elsewhere in the museum. Because the *Nest's* materials are changed frequently and can accommodate sensory needs, educators can meet children where they are in their development, and adjust to follow their interests and learning styles.

“As a mom who deeply values community, but has primarily parented in isolation through the pandemic, our family trip to Kidzu felt particularly healing. There were so many helpers there to greet us. With warmth, enthusiasm, patience, and wisdom, the Kidzu staff helped my small children explore and learn throughout the space. Having them community members help me parent, felt healing and hopeful.”

— Kidzu Caregiver, 2023

Environment as Third Teacher

A main Reggio tenet is that the environment is the child's third teacher. The learning imparted by a child's first two teachers—caregivers and peers—happens within the context of their environment, whether a home or a school. In the *Nest*, we are inspired by this quote from Reggio founder Loris Malaguzzi: “To make a lovable school, industrious, inventive, livable, documentable and communicable, a place of research, learning, re-cognition and reflection, where children, teachers and families feel well—is our point of arrival.” In our intentional design and curation of the environment, we have created a museum space where our community members “feel well.”

The *Nest* was designed to emulate textures and colors found in nature: from live edge wood, to large-scale, suspended nests made of reclaimed wood, to windows that allow for natural light and shadow exploration.

Many museums have observed more challenging behaviors and wear and tear on their exhibits and collections post-pandemic. At Kidzu Children's Museum, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, we have experienced the same: Our props need to be replaced at faster rates, and we are seeing more destructive behaviors to the built environment than ever before.

Our makerspace, the *Makery*, with its loud woodworking and tinkering, and our climbing structures have helped to direct some of the new energy, yet we are still noticing visitors coming in highly charged, and some of our environments may over-stimulate rather than soothe.

At the same time, we have found that our Reggio Emilia-inspired early learning spaces have had the opposite effect. We have seen firsthand and heard from visitors that they slow down and become more empathic to

tion. The natural world is invited in through a crawling tunnel made from tree pieces, a bird-watching live-feed from Cornell University projected onto the wall, along with bird sounds, and books about seasonal change. Playing in the *Nest* is not a substitute for being outside, but it offers opportunities for children and caregivers to slow down and regulate like they would in a natural setting.

Documentation and Advocacy

The *Nest* space and materials are curated to elicit feedback from visitors, which is responded to, often in real time, by museum educators. We also invite children and caregivers to document their experiences in the space, which, in the Reggio framework, makes learning visible to children, families, and the larger community. Documentation may include artwork, pictures and videos of children playing and exploring, recorded and dictated conversations and stories, as well as caregivers' thoughts, ideas, and questions.

Displaying this documentation also reflects visitors' experiences back to them so that they can see themselves in the space and feel a sense of connection and collaboration. Documentation informs the changes we make to the environment; children and caregivers become co-curators of the space—their play informs the future of the *Nest* and how it is used. At the same time, we are amplifying children's voices and modeling for our community how to respect and listen to its youngest members.

In this way, we are creating a community space for visitors that feels like theirs and not just a place where they come to play. The relationships among children, caregivers, and museum educators creates a shared responsibility that fosters empathy for and care of the *Nest*.

Design for Well-Being

By creating spaces that prioritize natural light, ventilation, greenery, acoustics, color, and materials, designers can create environments that promote relaxation, concentration, and creativity. Furthermore, designing spaces that encourage physical activity, social interaction, and healthy eating habits can support overall well-being and lead to healthier, happier communities.

The ability to capture hearts and minds is key to eliciting powerful



emotions. Experiences that allow individuals to connect in new and meaningful ways can inspire us to feel, behave, and think differently. Design can evoke emotions by signaling permission to experience something positive and new, or provide guardrails and guidance that can be springboards to adventure, freedom, and exhilaration. Many of the most effective and innovative experiences are successful precisely because they tap into the most basic human emotions.

—Experience Reigns,
[Gensler Research Institute](#)

Conclusion

As Kidzu begins to explore the possibility of relocation, the question of how to scale these lessons to an entire museum remains. Grounded in the Reggio Emilia philosophy, a 21st-century, post-pandemic children's museum would communicate respect for learners of all ages through its design choices



and orientation to community's needs, actively listening to all voices, especially those that are often ignored. From this position, we can design a museum that is accessible and engaging for visitors from infancy through adulthood.

We envision a campus, organized by age and types of play and learning with quieter transition places for reflection to balance more active spaces. While the *Nest* is designed to promote a sense of calm and slowness, the Reggio philosophy can also be integrated easily into active spaces, like a maker space or the outdoor environment. A Reggio-inspired design and aesthetic would infuse the entire space, along with its play and learning activities. We especially want to create meaningful and much-needed spaces for tweens and teenagers that are safe, supportive, respectful, and celebratory of their unique perspectives and capabilities during this mental health crisis with dramatically rising suicide rates in this age group.

Boundaries between indoor and outdoor will be blurred to maximize interaction with the natural environment, incorporating daylight, natural ventilation, and views to the surroundings. Caring for the physical, social, and emotional wellbeing of our visitors, caregivers, children, and staff, is of utmost importance so we can raise citizens who will care for each other and their environments, no matter what the current external challenges are.

Melanie Hatz Levinson is chief creative officer and lead curator, and Samantha Shannon is the Nest coordinator at Kidzu Children's Museum in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Brad Burns, AIA, design director and Southeast Region Culture + Museums Practice Area leader at Gensler, is currently working with Kidzu on a conceptual master plan for the new museum.

The *Nest* is generously funded in part by The William R. Kenan Jr. Charitable Trust.

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Additional Gensler Research

[Beyond the Senses](#)
[Museum Futures](#)



Lack of Joy is More of a Risk Than Wrestling: Looking in the Mirror with Playworker Jill Wood

Megan Dickerson, Interviewer

For the past seventeen years, Jill Wood has been the school librarian and founding director of an adventure playground at The Parish School in Houston, Texas. Since 1983, located on a seventeen-acre campus, The Parish School has worked with children ages two to twelve who have communication delays and learning differences, focusing on communication skills, social learning, nature, independence, and the arts.

Playworker Wood describes herself as “passionate about play and its ability to transform lives and communities.” In the Q&A that follows, fellow playworker Megan Dickerson, currently director of exhibits at the Birch Aquarium at Scripps Institution of Oceanography in LaJolla, California, talks with Wood about how the pandemic changed kids’ behavior and how the playwork approach worked to adapt existing resources to meet new needs.

“...living with children through pain, too, is part of playwork, and it’s hard. But it works.”

DICKERSON: As you got ready to reopen Adventure Play in June 2020 after a three-month closure, your team did a risk-benefit assessment (RBA), which requires the playworker to pause and reflect: What risks or hazards might exist in this playspace? What are the changes in personal perspective might I need to make to allow kids to take the risks they need? What were the kids like when you reopened?

WOOD: We saw very different children. They were mad and in conflict, with a lot of verbal, sometimes physical arguments. In our child-directed space, we see conflict as healthy. Children move through things quickly because we allow it, but when we reopened, they weren’t playing through stuff.

We also usually see large groups of children around the site, but we were seeing groups of two, maybe three kids max, and many who chose to be alone.

In our environment, playworkers consciously hold back so children’s culture can build, and they can feel ownership and consequences, but our typical, minimal interventions weren’t working. We had to step in more because they needed us more, and that didn’t feel like adventure play.

DICKERSON: It’s like the kids came back as a different species. But you were different too, right?

WOOD: Right? We were feeling anxious ourselves and then we were seeing the kids that we love and work with looking distressed. The changes were just so abrupt. Normally, change in all of our environments, whether they’re afterschool playgrounds or museums, typically happens over a long period of time. We weren’t prepared. We have since looked at our original June 2020 risk-benefit analysis for reopening, and it’s like a time capsule of ignorance. We didn’t know what we didn’t know.

DICKERSON: How did playwork tools and practices help you through this?

WOOD: I’m not gonna lie, we wanted to give up on playwork at times, because the classrooms during the school day, structured by adults, looked more peaceful. But there was always one of the playworkers on our team who would say, ‘Wait, that’s not what we do. We don’t respond to challenges by making more rules.’ A central part of playwork is observation, so we looked to see what the children were doing.

They were wrestling, which we’ve always allowed, but this was more heated, more intense. We would check in with the kids and ask, ‘Is this fun?’ And they kept saying, ‘Yes, yes, this is fun!’ So, we had to evaluate. Wrestling was not socially distanced, which was a big deal in the summer of 2020. We

They found the tool they needed, an incredible, sensory experience and a way of releasing all the feelings they (and the adults around them) didn't have words for. We saw giggles and things we hadn't seen for months. That shored us up. We thought, okay, this needs to happen. This is the happiest place on our playground and we need some happy. We need some joy.

Bottom line is that we decided that the lack of joy, lack of confidence, and resulting isolation was more of a risk than the wrestling.



felt that push/pull between what children were telling us they needed and what adults were comfortable with them doing at that time. In the end, we trusted our playwork and let it happen.

Children leaving wrestling looked a lot better than the kids who didn't join in. It took some parent education because kids were going home with bruises and that's not normal anymore. Yet, when I think back to when I was a kid, my shins were covered in bruises and scratches.

DICKERSON: Right, the kinds of bruises that, as a kid, you might not even have stopped for, because you were so absorbed in the play that you barely noticed it until you got home.

WOOD: Exactly. We had to normalize

that with parents, which was hard to do at a time when everyone was already more anxious than usual. But advocating comes naturally to playwork. The message we try to foster in our environment is: yes, these things might be uncomfortable for you, but we'll show you that what's happening is really important. We had the language to do at, and we used it.

We had built a second sand area, calling it the "social distancing sand pit." In our RBA, we had limited the sand pit to eight children. We even measured it—how many kids can we fit with social distance limits? And then we built another sand enclosure far from it, thinking we could just redirect kids there, if the original one got too full.

The irony was that kids weren't in the sand pit at all at first—they were spread out everywhere. We joked that social distancing wasn't really an issue. They didn't want to talk to each other, and when they did, they seemed to fight. The wrestling group functioned better though. And some of them moved to what they now call The Giant Mega Hammock, which was actually the cloth we suspended over the social distancing sand pit for shade. In the Mega Ham-

mock they did the opposite of social distancing: they wrestled.

They found the tool they needed, an incredible, sensory experience and a way of releasing all the feelings they (and the adults around them) didn't have words for. We saw giggles and things we hadn't seen for months. That shored us up. We thought, okay, this needs to happen. This is the happiest place on our playground and we need some happy. We need some joy.

Bottom line is that we decided that the lack of joy, lack of confidence, and resulting isolation was more of a risk than the wrestling.

DICKERSON: So many of us have reacted with "we need to create more rules because kids don't know how to behave." But I think

you're demonstrating that if we sit with the discomfort of "misbehavior," and take the time to reflect on it, kids will actually show us what they need. And then we can create the play-spaces that respond?

WOOD: That's right. Our team ultimately realized that wrestling is one of the most complex forms of play there is. Think of all that needs to be communicated and understood when you are wrestling. Our children were taking that on, and they were finding solace in it.

DICKERSON: You have to challenge yourself to trust children, and not just on an adventure playground, because you're also The Parish School librarian! What does trust look like in those two very different spaces?

WOOD: Both spaces are designed to be child-directed, so I need to keep track of and advocate for what children are actually reading. Sometimes grown-ups are uncomfortable when children check out books that are too "advanced" or materials someone has taken home a million times before, but children know what they are doing.

For instance, our comic book area is huge—almost a third the size of our nonfiction section—because I watched and noted what the students were taking home. I built up our graphic novels and we now have wait lists for them. Our students love coming to library even though many of them have learning differences that make reading very difficult. But I trust that they will tell me what they need. I just need to watch, listen, and respond. Like a playworker.

In a similar way, museums might examine their adult expectations of what they want children to be doing versus what they are doing. Observe how they are using museum spaces and follow their lead.

DICKERSON: It's been three years since your adventure playground reopened to a whole new "species" of kid. Are you still seeing some of that changed behavior? Or did it go away with the adaptations you made?



When I'm talking to schools that want to integrate more playwork ideas or loose parts, I always tell them: you can have all the loose parts in the world, but if the adults aren't responsive and flexible, they won't be "loose." Those loose parts will be tight.

WOOD: The Mega Hammock is just an integrated part of our site now. Sometimes they use it, sometimes they don't. I wouldn't say the increased anger and conflict have gone away. What has gone away is the lack of resources for the kind of play children needed. Now that we have those additional resources, the feelings and expressions of those feelings are less "disruptive" because we've made room for them.

DICKERSON: Creating more rules is like staring into the sun, when we need to look in the mirror.

WOOD: So true. When I'm talking to schools that want to integrate more playwork ideas or loose parts, I always tell them: you can have all the loose parts in the world, but if the adults aren't responsive and flexible, they won't be "loose." Those loose parts will be tight.

DICKERSON: To stay in a place of constant learning and change—to be, as a human, the ultimate loose part— is challenging. What practices kept you going?

WOOD: Building a team and reflecting with them is key. We have protected time each week for reflection, where we help one another question and grow. The practice of holding back and letting children take the lead gets easier the more you do it, because children prove to you that they don't need you.

We may laugh but we also know it's not that simple. They sometimes need a hug, a bandage, a quick fix. They need us to identify safety hazards on site and hold space for their play. But in the same breath, they need us to trust them. And the more we do that, the more we realize that it works.

Children, and humans in general, are completely unpredictable. Something will always come up that you need your team to reflect on. Working with children is not only humbling but incredibly creative and rich. Kids will always come with new information, new ideas, new experiences, new connections that I never could have dreamt of, and that is such a gift.

And now we've added goats.



DICKERSON: "Adventure Playground: Now with Goats!"

WOOD: I worked hard to get us goats, because they are funny, playful and the great equalizer. I don't know anything about goats. The children didn't know anything about goats. So, we're learning together, figuring it out, and following the goats' lead. It keeps you on your toes and keeps you from feeling too comfortable in what you think you know.

DICKERSON: That summarizes the lesson of playwork, both in 2020 and now: we can't get too comfortable in what we think. We need to be the adults who give out bandages and look for hazards. But we're learning as much from kids as they're learning from us. Just try trusting kids for a little while. See what happens.


WOOD: In mid-2020, I wanted to let go of playwork. I thought "this stuff is not working, and my team is about to fall apart." I kept looking outside of playwork to traditional classroom management, direct teaching, taking away supplies or aspects of the environment that were hot points. But living with children through pain is part of playwork too, and it's hard. But it works.

dents to find their voices, practice listening to others and express themselves through a group word brainstorm and an art activity. In this art and advocacy workshop, students are inspired by artists who use their artwork to share their thoughts and help advocate for their communities. The students use techniques of collage and weaving to create an expression quilt that channels their advocacy through art.

In this program, we also bring out a prized symbol of childhood community-building: the gym class parachute. Not only does it produce giggles (a very real reason for having it in the lesson—laughter is important!), it also symbolizes working together. When one child expresses themselves by lifting the parachute, everyone else then mimics both their action and their voice, and the group sees the power of amplifying each other's voices and actions for the good of the community.

The refocusing of the museum's programs has also necessitated an adjustment to staff training and a re-prioritization of internal team building. We have built in more time- and depth- for educator training and have prioritized team teaching with the acknowledgment that more dynamic activities require more hands on deck. We want BCM's educators to feel comfortable facilitating high-energy programs that reflect and



draw on children's own energy and capitalize on the informal learning environment of the museum. The Museum is a unique space in which children can make messes, and build and release the energy that they walk in with – all the while learning from it. We hope that on the best day, we are helping to facilitate the rebuilding of the muscles of constructive engagement after the difficult, isolating, and disorienting experience of the pandemic. In many ways, what visitors have shown us they are craving- through their attendance numbers, and through the positive feedback to our program offerings- has been a reminder that community-mindedness has always been at the heart of the work we do. Recent success has offered a poignant reminder that investing energy and resource in the [museum community](#) will ensure that it serves as a renewable and generative resource moving forward. 

Kate Mirand Calleri is director of education and Hana Elwell is vice president of education and exhibits at the Brooklyn Children's Museum.

RESOURCES

Sun J, Singletary B, Jiang H, Justice LM, Lin TJ, Purtell KM. Child behavior problems during COVID-19: Associations with parent distress and child social-emotional skills. *J Appl Dev Psychol.* 2022 Jan-Feb;78:101375. doi: 10.1016/j.appdev.2021.101375. Epub 2021 Dec 14. PMID: 34924662; PMCID: PMC8668344. [Child behavior problems during COVID-19: Associations with parent distress and child social-emotional skills - PMC \(nih.gov\)](#)

[The pandemic's impact on children and development | News & Stories | DHMC and Clinics \(dartmouth-hitchcock.org\)](#)

[Arts in Schools Report 2020-2021 \(nyced.org\)](#)

[Helping Children Cope With Changes Resulting From COVID-19 \(nasponline.org\)](#)

[Managing the long-term effects of the pandemic on your child's mental health | UNICEF Parenting](#)

[School art and music classes are helping kids readjust to in-person learning : NPR](#)

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NIKKI PRIHODA
Program Coordinator
Wonderscope
(Kansas City, MO)

Full-time since November 2019. Previously worked with the Girl Scouts and at the Beanstalk Children's Garden, a child-focused garden within Kansas City Community Gardens.

Works with guests (children and adults), and field trip students and their chaperones.



DANIEL BELLINGER
Science Educator
North Country Children's Museum (Potsdam, NY)

On staff for five years, initially part-time, then full-time, then back to part-time since COVID. Previously worked as an outdoor educator/trail crew for conservation efforts; program coordinator for a local nonprofit skill-sharing workshop; and afterschool educator and troubled youth supervisor.

Works primarily with family visitors and science-focused field trips.



CANDACE ROSS
Guest Services Operations Manager
Children's Museum of Richmond (VA)

On staff for twenty-four years, previous positions include summer intern, guest services associate, birthday reservationist/manager on duty, guest services team lead, database and information coordinator, database and customer service coordinator, visitor and member services lead.

Works with family visitors, field trips, admissions, exhibits, programs, and events.



KATIE FISHER
Assistant Manager
Front Desk
Hands On (Olympia, WA)

Full-time for three years, starting as a front desk supervisor six months before COVID.

Master's degree in museum studies with a professional certificate in digital curation; worked previously at the U.S. Naval Undersea Museum and volunteered at museums throughout college and grad school.

Works primarily with family visitors and group visits, e.g. field trips, camps, parties, and preschool families.



WILLIAM MILEC
Playologist
Glazer Children's Museum (Tampa, FL)

Part-time for four years. Previously worked as a museum educator and a zoo educator

Works with caregivers and children on the museum floor and in the exhibits.



HEATHER WOOD
Visitor Engagement Senior Coordinator
Hands On (Olympia, WA)

After a one-year internship, has worked full-time for nine years; previously worked at a dairy farm.

Works directly with the public, manages staff, and coordinates outreach to school districts to create educational activities for afterschool programs. Also, Sunday support supervisor, dealing with injuries, accidents, or unhappy customers.



Glazer Children's Museum playologists Rome Johnson, Coen McGarrah, and Kayla Grubbe: just another day in a children's museum.

My career seems to follow whichever students are being hit hardest by the social/political environment of the time.
—Rome Johnson

ROME JOHNSON
KAYLA GRUBBE
Playologists
Glazer Children's Museum (Tampa, FL)

Rome and Kayla both part-time for a year

KAYLA
Previously worked at a Renaissance Festival and on playgrounds.

ROME
Previously worked in Title One and low-income school districts; also worked in childcare and with special needs students during the pandemic.

Both currently work with outreach events and with caregivers, children, and field trip groups on the floor, interacting with guests, navigating exhibits, and facilitating activities.

- I invite families to play,
- encourage creativity
- through our daily activities,
- and activate (and clean!) exhibit spaces.



MARY KNUTSON
Playologist
Glazer Children's Museum (Tampa, FL)

Part-time for two years (June 2018–November 2020); returning in March 2023

Previously volunteered with youth groups and church schools every summer as a teaching assistant and/or camp education staff.

Most common problems encountered with visitors?

KAYLA:

Disappointment: some guests feel that the museum is just for younger age groups, or they miss some of their former exhibit favorites which are no longer here.

WILLIAM:

Parents not watching children.

HEATHER:

Adult visitors who have a hard time following rules; problems we have with children often result from adults who disregard the rules: bringing food and drink into the museum, leaving children to wander on their own, or simply disregarding signage and other (formerly) commonly accepted museum practices.

ROME:

Large field trip groups with not enough chaperones. Inadequately monitored field trip groups can impact other visitors. Two adults may be able to manage forty children in a classroom, but not in a museum. And hand sanitizer stations: everyone notices right away when they're empty.

1. Inattentive adults

2. Lost children (see #1)

3. Visitors uncomfortable in crowds



Dan introduces kids to a Van de Graaff generator in a science class.

DAN:

Technical issues (unnecessary force applied to touch screens); membership issues (confusion over names on their memberships or frustration when asked to present membership-confirming IDs); social issues (parents failing to encourage their children to clean up after themselves or neglecting to supervise them).

CANDACE:

Reconnecting inattentive caregivers to their separated children.

KATIE:

Unprepared for check-in, including paying for tickets and unaware of area parking options. People are also surprised by the crowds. Between the two, they can become overwhelmed at the start.

MARY:

Initially, after reopening, families hesitated to join activities or take part in high sensory exhibits. Lots of questions about cleaning procedures. Now, crowded spaces or exhibits are tough, especially if we have a lot of field trips in one day.

NIKKI:

Guests and groups who don't clean up after themselves and leave the exhibits looking less than stellar for anyone playing after them. Often happens when the adult/chaperone is too engaged with a book, a laptop, or a phone and less engaged with their children, who can easily slip away from distracted adults.

Most useful advice you received in your staff training?

KAYLA:

"5 feet/10 feet rule": If a guest is within five feet, initiate conversation; if they are with ten feet, give small gesture of greeting, like a wave.

WILLIAM:

Play must be fostered; it is the way children learn and develop a world view.

MARY:

What you say or do could spark an idea within a child or family. Make sure you fuel them with positivity and encouragement.

CANDACE:

"Don't take it personal." Among upset caregivers, a lot of their frustrations have nothing to do with anything that has occurred in our building: home situations, sick parents, issues around their children with disabilities, or their own personal ailments. Sometimes they just want someone to listen.

1. Don't take it personal.

2. Parents need play, too.

3. There are no dumb questions.

DAN:

Science education in an age of polarization has suggested reframing the teaching lens. By avoiding certain keywords and emphasizing alternative frameworks (energy independence and security with off-grid housing, and medical emergency reductions and savings, etc.), people who may have a cultural bias against modern scientific principles (climate change, vaccines, biodiversity loss, etc) are encouraged to stay and learn.

ROME:

Code Missing Adult procedures. I knew how to do a Code Adam but I wouldn't have known what to do about a missing adult.

KATIE:

1) Learn your staff's learning styles, and 2) there are no dumb questions—you don't know what you don't know.

NIKKI:

Invite the parents to play! They want to engage with their kids—they just sometimes don't know how.

Empathy: we don't know what is going on behind the scenes with our guests. Everyone has a backstory and it could be affecting the behavior or emotions they bring through the door that day. Be patient and kind, don't jump to conclusions.

HEATHER:

Adults need to play, too. Some adults make art projects in the studio or take a break to play a game on their phone. Ideally, they play with their kids while they are here, but I am also happy that they feel comfortable enough to take some time for themselves. No matter what mood they came in with, a good visit can help them have a good day when they leave.

NIKKI:

The differences I've noticed among guests apply to me as well! First, the amount of hand sanitizer we go through is staggering! Secondly, people seem less comfortable with crowds and sharing personal space. Families in classes tend to stay in their own bubble. For a long time, socialization happened through screens; guests now look at screens more than before. Kids find it difficult to play with or talk to other kids. This penchant for "staying with one's own" could be responsible for the new lack of cleaning up. Used to engaging with their families alone, people could be simply forgetting someone else is going to come along and play with the same toys.

DAN:

A slightly-increased tendency to challenge rules and policies that inconvenience them, but more likely to try and connect with strangers. Younger children often start off introverted and possessive of the toys/exhibits, but after multiple visits, are much more comfortable in the space, running up to and playing with complete strangers with near-abandon—much more so than children of a similar age even pre-Covid.

CANDACE:

A lot of babies and new parents are first-time visitors. Kids are usually shy when you greet them anyway, but when everyone was wearing a mask and they couldn't see your face, they were more hesitant to smile or even acknowledge that you were talking to them. We are now seeing a lot more inattentive caregivers and separated children.

MARY:

People were searching for pockets of normalcy—something fun to do with their families in a safe space. Engaging with others was harder: used to being in their shell, everyone had forgotten how to interact in group settings. Lack of socially interactive experiences led to occasional insensitivity. Today, although there still is hyper-awareness around cleanliness, touching exhibits (and other people), we've reached a new "normal" that guests are comfortable with.

KATIE:

A lot of people relearning social protocols. Many seem to have forgotten how to wait in line or they bypass them entirely trying to get right into the museum. When you ask if they have been checked in, they say they didn't realize they had to pay for tickets or wait in line.

HEATHER:

Initially, children were cautious. They didn't wander far from their adult and vice versa. They sat far away from other kids in the art studio and did not engage with other children. We saw an *opposite* effect on adults. Regardless of their stance on social distancing or masking, initially, the majority placed themselves in a directly confrontational position under the guise of protecting their children. Parents were on edge, overly protective, and looking for opportunities to gain control over situations where they feel powerless. As we have progressed, so have the kids. Their durable and curious minds have re-emerged and they have begun to reach out to others. The museum culture has regained equilibrium, and we have noticed less overt hostility.

What practices / approaches do you have the most success with in redirecting problematic behaviors?

CANDACE:

Reminding caregivers that the museum is a space for the whole family to play and interact with the exhibits together.

KATIE:

Active listening and acknowledgement—most people just want to be heard. Then explain what we can do for them and why.

NIKKI:

Prevention is key: we invite parents right off the bat to play with their kids, rather than simply watch them (also helps prevent kiddos from sneaking off)—parents love it! We incentivize cleaning up by giving hand stamps—kids love stamps! If a child is having a meltdown or disrupting a class, we assist them and their grownup by offering our calm room or a change of scenery/activity.

For guests who may not be ready for close contact, we incorporate parallel play into our pop-ups, making it easy for someone to carry their craft to a less crowded spot.

1. Listening

2. Calmly explaining rules/options

3. Fixing the problem

HEATHER:

Listen to people—adults or children. Use calm body language and a soft voice. If their behavior is unsafe or against museum rules, let them know. If they are hostile, maintain a sympathetic ear, showing that you understand and then give them options that fulfill their needs while still keeping them (and other visitors) safe and comfortable. I try very hard never to bluntly say "no" or take away choice completely.

MARY:

Put a positive spin on everything. Show guests a different, fun activity they can put their energy into or model empathic behavior that makes kids excited to want to share, take turns, etc. and makes them and their friends feel good.

WILLIAM:

Distract them from problem behaviors.

ROME:

Patience. Most kids and adults will correct their behavior if asked nicely and given clear expectations.

DAN:

Sometimes, this can be as easy as explaining why we do something: "Please watch your children, because some children make messes and leave behind things that your child might try to swallow," or, "We ask for ID because we've had people try to use someone else's membership." Other times, their frustration can be alleviated just by following them to the source and doing our best to fix it.

Children who challenge you have reasons behind their behavior—and those reasons are almost always outside of their control. Problematic adults are like insecure children—they usually feel like they've lost control over some important aspect of their lives, and seek to regain it.



Glazer Children's Museum playologist William Milec ready for action on Pi Day.

CANDACE:

I talk over my day with my supervisor to and brainstorm options to handle situations in the future. Other stress relievers: jewelry-making, video gaming, and dance fitness. Sometimes a simple walk in the park or star gazing after dark can also do the trick.

KATIE:

I vent to my husband or co-workers. Then I try to find a happy or funny thing that happened during the day. Finally, I make sure to get some good cuddles from my dog.

KAYLA:

Boba coffee, food, sleep.

WILLIAM:

Go home, watch TV, play video games.

ROME:

- I listen to survival podcasts.
- Dealing with kids all day seems less strenuous when you hear about someone surviving forty-eight hours with a shattered pelvis in a canyon.

HEATHER:

I'm a problem solver, so I try to think about what made the shift hard and how to make the next one better. If it was rough due to things out of my control, I focus on the fun interactions I had with other patrons or work with my staff to gather cute or funny stories to share at clean up. Called "Moments of Awesome," these make the hard parts a little easier and we all get a chance to reflect on why we love working at the museum.

DAN:

A long, hot shower, a homemade cocktail, sitting down on the couch with my wife, and either watching a fun show or playing a board/ card game with our housemates.

MARY:

Calling a friend or my parents after work; cooking or baking with my significant other at home, or watching our favorite shows or playing board games/video games together.

NIKKI:

I head home, put my feet up, and relax with my dog, three cats, and three rabbits. I'll order Indian food and call it a night. 