

Birth of Playspace

Jeri Robinson



I have learned to work with a number of new people and have also learned about limitations—my own and others. At this point in the museum’s history, the whole institution is working under considerable stress which makes it doubly more difficult to sort out the issues. Are creative processes always so confusing and trouble laden? Would a real set of procedures serve as a deterrent to creativity?

I have grown through this experience. More than once I had to stop and ask myself why I continue when I feel so negative about it. In the past, I might have just quit, thinking nothing was worth such pressure and conflict. But I know to some degree I too am caught up in the dream. Ever since I came to the museum nearly six years ago, the “move” had been discussed; now only a year away, I had the desire to see it through. Instead of running from the conflict I wanted to find a way to work it out, at least for myself.

It made me uncomfortable. Jeri Robinson was proposing an area—an exhibit, a gathering place—designed and set aside specifically for preschool-age children and their parents, caretakers and teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Mike Spock

Logic was on her side: the proportion of families with toddlers was definitely increasing, fast; maybe as much as half of visiting groups included very young kids. In fact the word was that the museum was one of the few places where you could find a good, safe, publicly accessible early childhood play environment. The museum seemed to be a good fit for those families.

But I resisted. Jeri's proposal seemed to challenge my deepest professional values. I believed museums—all museums for all visitors—were about offering provocative experiences with interesting things and significant ideas. I thought we were a *real* museum. Even if we went about things in surprisingly playful ways, underneath The Children's Museum was about important, serious stuff. The fact that we had skated at the edge of what a museum was by inviting kids to *do* things, *explore* things, *pretend* things, *figure out* things, *make* things, *enjoy* things, rather than just allowing them to look and listen, did not, at least in my view, place us outside the museum tradition. We were merely living the famous old Chinese aphorism: "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand."

Personally and professionally, I thought I was in the museum mainstream, too. As a ten year old, wandering alone in New York museums, I was attracted to cool stuff which in turn led to profound thoughts. From my childhood perspective there were fascinating, memorable—important and serious—things to learn in museums.

And looking at old photos of The Children's Museum next to the Pond in Jamaica Plain, there were my New England contemporaries doing equally important and serious work with Native American handling materials in a school class and with the stuffed birds in the July Jaunter's summer camp. And in the 60s we had elementary-school-aged kids learning how movies moved by animating strips of paper in a zoetrope, interpreting replica artifacts from an ancient Greek archeological site, participating as guests in a formal Japanese tea ceremony, stimulating cross-generational conversations in *Grandmother's Attic*, or dissecting and matching up the parts of cut gladiolas at a table in *What's Inside?*. All these were important and serious museum experiences that used interesting things to explore challenging ideas.

I also took comfort that The Children's Museum had real collections with real accession numbers and real collection records. Collections were central to our claim to being a real museum. Even if some exhibits, programs and classroom kits did not contain true artifacts and specimens they were based on using tangible things (science apparatus, stage settings and costumes, functional replicas, etc.) to illuminate the world and ideas.

What gave me the most pause with Jeri's proposal for an early childhood area and program was that I also believed that uncovering the meanings of objects in our collections and the ideas in our exhibits were necessarily limited by the ages of our youngest visitors. Very young kids have powerful but limited capacities. That dinosaurs were not hunted by cavemen was something that could not be understood nor appreciated by a five-year-old. What happened in the past, making sense of other cultures, how complicated things work—ultimately terribly important things—would have to wait until the developmental stages when those capacities ripened.

So I was loath to surrender the museum to a more "primitive" developmental level and put aside exploiting sophisticated objects and complex ideas where I thought museums shone and where I learned so much as a grade school child myself. I felt that by catering to the youngest visitors and their caretakers we would accelerate the downward spiral of the museum's intellectual horizon, even making the rich learning resource of our collections beside the point. I imagined older kids, surrounded by much younger kids, asking themselves: "Should I be here? I'm having fun, but isn't this just a place for babies?" I thought that older kids, not babies were the ones that should be encouraged.

Even if Jeri Robinson's seemingly innocent proposal ended up challenging the very core of what The Children's Museum was and might become, the babies were coming anyway. Although we thought that up to that point we had made no special accommodation to the intellectual or physical needs of very young kids, they seemed to be having a great time, totally absorbed in their "work." And of course we laid claim to the idea that the museum—the name said it all—was a client-centered organization. Unlike art, history and science museums that were about something, a children's museum was *for somebody*. Therefore, if we truly believed we were client-centered we'd better decide what to do about this profound shift in our visitor profile.

But Jeri had another, deeper agenda that turned me from a grudging skeptic into an enthusiastic supporter. She understood that setting aside a special place and program for our youngest visitors would create a terrific learning opportunity for grownups too. By installing cozy seating at the edges of play spaces Jeri thought it might encourage adults to observe, compare and speculate among each other about the developing capacities and learning behaviors of their kids. And if that strategy worked, she knew those caring adults would become more knowledgeable about early child development and more surefooted and relaxed in their roles as parents, teachers and caregivers. I realized that for me if the parents were the learners, the preschool kids were the exhibit—the vehicle—for delivering sophisticated understanding to the adults in much the same way as the school-age child's encounter with a challenging experiment at a science museum delivers science learning.

Like all creative breakthroughs, Jeri's idea was so obvious and to-the-point that it won the day—thank god—and the rest was history. Once convinced, I only had to get out of the way so Jeri could do her thing and make her program, *Playspace*, the museum and me (perhaps undeservedly given my early opposition) famous.

From an Idea to an Exhibit: The *Before You Were Three* Project

Jeri Robinson

This article was adapted from a paper written by Jeri Robinson in May 1978 for a class entitled Education 729, part of a graduate program in leadership at Wheelock College. The assignment was to keep a diary of a situation in which she was involved that required leadership skills. How do you become a leader in a new group? How do you analyze your own leadership style and then apply it in the most effective way to achieve your goals? In real time, this paper reveals the day-to-day struggles of a young woman, passionate about early childhood programming, as she learns to mesh with a group of experienced, opinionated and outspoken museum professionals, some of whom didn't take very young museum audiences very seriously. —Ed.

Introduction (May 17, 1978)

The Children's Museum was founded in 1913 by a group of Boston school teachers who were "committed to the notion that museums have an important role to play in the education of elementary school aged children." In its early years, the museum was noted for exhibits and programs in the natural sciences and cultures and, even in the early days, its founders were firm believers in "hands-on" experiences for children.

Over the years, many changes in programs occurred. The museum is now preparing for the move to its new home on Museum Wharf. Many of the programs and exhibits developed at the museum will be clustered under three headings: Me, Manmade World, and Meeting Ground.

Throughout the years the staff developers have been encouraged to take an active role in shaping the museum's direction through the suggestion of new exhibit areas and implementation of new programs.

As the developer of programs for young audiences, I became concerned about the role of early childhood education within the museum's Visitor Center program. In this article, I will attempt to share with you my experience of how an idea actually turned into an exhibit.

History of the *Before You Were Three* Project

April 1977

During the spring vacation week of 1977 the museum cosponsored Great Pets Day to promote the book of the same title. The museum donated the space, and the event expenses (extra staff, materials, consultants) were paid by the publishers.

Several weeks later, Cambridge resident Robie Harris, coauthor along with Elizabeth Levy, of *Before You Were Three*, a recently published children's book on early childhood development, came to talk with Elaine Heumann Gurian, director of Visitor Center, and me about the possibility of doing a similar day to promote her book or using the book's subject matter for an exhibit.

At this time, brainstorming of new exhibits and



In *Before You Were Three*, kids lift doors to reveal the baby pictures of famous people such as Julia Child, Muhammad Ali and Mister Rogers whose grownup photos were featured above each one.

expanded programs for the Wharf, the proposed new home of the children's museum, was underway. I had already expressed an interest in developing some kind of exhibit to give child development information to both kids and adults. Initially, it was only a suggestion, based on my experiences with parents and the issues that had arisen while developing programs and working with both the intern staff and the public in the *Grownups and Kids* area of the museum. (*Grownups & Kids* was installed in 1971 to provide preschoolers with creative learning experiences involving arts and crafts, science or cooking, and to give their parents ideas for trying similar activities at home using low-cost, easily found materials.) During these sessions questions such as: When will she ever learn to share (in reference to a two year old)?; When will he learn to use scissors?. Or comments such as, He has no attention span; His work is always sloppy; or He can't do it, he doesn't go to a creative school; were often heard. Exhibit staff, too, often had questions about developmental levels or age appropriateness of activities.

We were all dreaming about our ideal exhibit areas. My dreams included a much larger area for mixed

I wanted to foster parent-child interactions within the museum setting, but felt that there had to be certain environmental and programmatic changes that had to happen before this could take place.

Robie and I met several more times during the spring to brainstorm activity ideas for a day based on the topics in *Before You Were Three*—how children begin to walk, talk, explore, and have feelings.... The *Before You Were Three* project was becoming an exhibit, whether or not I was ready to think of it as one.

grownups and kids activities. This area would also include a safe environment for infants and toddlers to crawl or play in so they could get out of their back packs and stretch without being run down by older kids. Parents with preschoolers could find here an assortment of homemade games and other materials to use to play with their child. Or scout leaders could find samples and directions for the craft projects that were taught in the space. I wanted to foster parent-child interactions within the museum setting, but felt that there had to be certain environmental and programmatic changes that had to happen before this could take place.

I shared these thoughts with Robie and decided to read her book. I read it and then gave it to an eleven-year-old girl and her five-year-old brother to read. They both liked it very much and tried to do some of the suggested activities such as trying to reexperience the stages of walking from “airplaning” to “cruising” or trying some of the variations of crawling. These children had a two-year-old sister and according to their mother the book had not only given her the opportunity to reminisce about their early lives but also made the children more aware of what their baby sister was experiencing. I learned from Robie that many children had done similar things and that the book had wide appeal. I wanted to work with her in some fashion. The more we talked, the more we agreed: this was a topic that kids would be interested in. We decided to look into the possibility of doing a day around the book, similar to Great Pets Day. Robie thought that her publisher, Delacorte, along with several other people might be willing to fund it.

Robie and I met several more times during the spring to brainstorm ideas for a day based on the topics in *Before You Were Three*—how children begin to walk, talk, explore and have feelings. Robie went on tour during the summer to promote her book and I began to work on proposed expansion of early childhood services at the Wharf.

October 1977

In early fall we got together to plan our Before You Were Three Day or maybe a whole weekend. Robie sug-

gested it might be better if someone from the museum contacted Ellen Teguis, her contact at Delacorte, about money. I agreed to call her later in the week.

As the museum began to organize its fundraising tasks for the new building, the development office organized a taskforce for each program area. Taskforces were each made up of several people who had previously given money to The Children’s Museum, had an interest in a particular area, or knew others who might. In general the taskforces didn’t work too well. There were more than twelve different ones and attendance at the meetings was poor. Nevertheless, an early childhood task force emerged. As part of this task force (actually at this point, I was the entire early childhood staff), I attended weekly meetings at the Wharf to meet with prospective funders and tell them about our plans for expanding the early childhood services at the museum. On two occasions I met with Elaine Heumann Gurian, Mike Spock, Jim Zien, and a prospective donor and we were able to raise some funds.

One of these meetings turned out to be with Robie and her husband Bill. They had been annual givers to the museum but were also involved with a family foundation that had an interest in early childhood. Once we all realized that Robie was the same person with whom I was working on a possible exhibit collaboration, Bill made it clear that their decision to contribute to the museum would have nothing to do with Robie’s work for the museum. Less than a week later the museum received a check from their foundation for the early childhood program.

December 1977

After this successful fundraising meeting Elaine and I met to talk about the Before You Were Three project. Several calls had been placed to Delacorte, but no answer had been received. Elaine felt we should continue trying to reach Delacorte, but should also continue our planning. Robie and I had met several more times during the fall, and had a growing list of ideas of what we would like to do. However, without a date or budget, there was little to do except more brainstorming.

And then the reality hit—how do you look at the bureaucracies? That’s what I felt the museum was—all these little fiefdoms and bureaucracies—people with their own quirks in their understanding. Here I was with this cockamamie idea coming in from left field. And I’m working with somebody from the outside (Robie Harris) who had both the power and the resources to get what she wanted done. Where do I sit? How much can you push without things toppling around you? How can you be respectful of what exists but at the same time push for a new idea in a place where there’s no precedence for it? I muddled through it. I would find support in some places and frustration in others, trying to keep the integrity of the audience and their needs at the forefront.

—Jeri Robinson, videotape interview, November 2005

After the initial gift from Robie and Bill had been received, Elaine seemed more interested in the project. She met with Robie several more times to talk about additional sources of funding. Fall had rapidly passed without a *Before You Were Three* date. Elaine suggested we plan it for the April vacation week of 1978, thus giving us four months of additional planning time and perhaps giving Delacorte more time to respond with funding.

Up to this point, Robie and I had shared all the planning for the project, but now I was beginning to feel uncomfortable because it was becoming less of a project and more of an exhibit. I was excited about the possibility of doing a week about *Before You Were Three*, but there remained many unanswered questions:

- What were my and Robie's roles now? How were they to be defined and by whom?
- If Delacorte didn't come through with any support, what would happen? (Elaine had estimated our expenses at approximately \$1,000 but this had been based on a one- or two-day program, not one that would last a week.
- Who would make decisions about publicity, design work, etc.?

(The answers to these questions would not be coming soon, and even at the end of the actual week itself, some were still unanswered).

The *Before You Were Three* project was becoming an exhibit, whether or not I was ready to think of it as one. Up to this time, Robie and I had considered it as sort of a tryout of ideas, entirely our own, to see how much interest there was in the subject matter. There had been no set criteria, but now, with nine days of museum programming time to fill, we would have to think more clearly and realistically about what we wanted to do.

With the unknowns of Design and Production (D&P) time available and support and budget, realistically we didn't know what could be done in terms of actual exhibit pieces. So far all of our decisions had been made as a result of brainstorming sessions—we seemed mutually more wedded to some ideas than others. I thought it would be quite unlikely that many new exhibit components would be built since this "exhibit" would only last nine days, and knowing the pressures D&P was already under, this would probably not be a priority.

January 1978

During December and January few new decisions were made. It was nearly impossible to get everyone together for a meeting. The holidays, vacations, fund raising trips, etc., kept us at a standstill. And each new meeting only added an additional person who needed to be brought up to date.

As Wharf discussions continued, *Before You Were Three* began showing up as an exhibit, yet no one, least of all me, was really able to define it. I felt pressured, feeling we were putting the cart before the horse, in talking about an exhibit that was still only a few untried

The Giant Crib



THE INITIAL CONCEPT

We wanted to include a giant crib where children could see the view they had had of the world as infants. The crib would be equipped with an oversized busy box, mobile, teddy bear, blanket and cradle gym. Exactly how this would be constructed or programmed was unclear, but we wanted to build it so we could see what kids or adults would do.

R&D WEIGHS IN

The crib would be approximately six by eight feet, the size of a standard sheet of Tri-Wall. For safety reasons it would need to be built of wood, since children might want to climb on it. For this first iteration it needn't be raised, but could be built on the floor with a heavily padded rug to serve as the mattress. One side would be railed like a real crib, with the bars (two-inch dowels) spaced at four-inch intervals. Andy Merrill figured this would give the correct perspective. The other side of the crib would be a painted wall to simulate a nursery crib's bars. One end would be high (the headboard) and the other would be low, approximately eighteen inches. This would be the end where the visitor would enter the crib.

THE REALITY

Although it looks more like a giant playpen, it has universal appeal. Kids of all ages use it, and it has a different feeling when different groups are in it.



...were these ideas really an exhibit that would teach anything about early development?...It seemed to be a pleasant mixture of activities but what would it really teach and to whom?

ideas that still only existed on scraps of yellow paper. I had never developed a new exhibit before, and felt uncomfortable about tackling it this way. In our original understanding the day- or weekend-long temporary exhibit would have given Robie and I the chance to try things out. But now I was being asked to make decisions about how much space this exhibit needed, etc.

As I looked at the existing exhibit ideas, I began to question whether we really had an exhibit or not. Our program had been developed similar to the Great Pets Day concept with activities dispersed all over the museum. Would it be possible to somehow join these together in a coherent exhibit? Did they even make sense as an exhibit?

So far, Robie and I had agreed that we would like to try to work with the following concepts:

- **A Giant Crib.** where children could see the view they had as infants of the world. The crib would be equipped with an oversized busy box, mobile, teddy bear, blanket and cradle gym. Exactly how this would be constructed or programmed was unclear, but we wanted to build it so we could see what kids or adults would do.

- **Walking.** I wanted to develop some kind of maze that would help kids simulate the various stages of walking. This again would be costly. Robie wanted to try something using photos from the book and text that included directions and suggested movements to get kids involved. We also thought of trying to get someone in who could do movement or improvisation to help kids act out the various stages of walking.

- **Talking and Feelings.** Both remained areas of interest. Tackling the subject of feelings was an enormous



Visitors of all ages read about the stages a baby goes through in learning to walk, from learning to hold her chin up to airplaning, and then were encouraged to try them out. Exhibit signage was based on the original book *Before You Were Three*.

task; the museum was already interested in doing a major exhibit on it. Since feelings develop in infancy and toddlerhood, it would fit in well here, but we hadn't thought beyond that. We felt we could handle the subject of talking through tapes. By taping children of different ages and at various developmental stages, the listener would be able to get an auditory idea of how speech progresses from gurgles to actual words. For older children and parents, the importance of language development would be stressed through additional programs and projects including selected readings and activities to foster language development.

Growing Up in the Museum | Jeri Robinson

Excerpted from an interview, November 2005



Jeri Robinson, age 4

I remember coming into the foyer of the museum and seeing all these things down at my height level. I can clearly remember seeing the birds. And then at some point I saw the dollhouses, and I was sold and in love. I was a doll person anyway. I can just remember going from house to house, going upstairs and walking through the dioramas that had all the dolls in them.

I think my first trip to The Children's Museum was when I was about three. My brother, who died of polio in 1955, was still alive, and I remember coming with my mother. It must have been a school vacation week. I remember having gone to the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) before and seeing statues. That's all I can remember about the MFA—the statues. So the idea of going to another museum—more statues. I remember coming (the museum was in the older smaller building) into the foyer and seeing the birds. And seeing all these things down at my height level. I can clearly remember seeing the birds. And then at some point I saw the dollhouses, and I was sold and in love. I was a doll person anyway. I can just remember going from house to house, going upstairs and walking through the dioramas that had all the dolls in them. That's about all I can remember about my first visit. We came back a lot—during vacation weeks and for special programs. I remember dipping candles in the colonial kitchen. I always remember feeling it was a really nice place, but not really quite understand-

What was now happening was unclear. One day you went home thinking you understood a program idea, only to return the next morning to find out that it had been turned into something else.

Other areas considered for the exhibit were a “baby play area” equipped with all types of paraphernalia such as changing tables, baby carriers, high chairs, strollers, etc., that could be used for dramatic play; an area where parents could talk about their babies to kids or, as we sometimes called it, the “live baby exhibit” area. This activity had been quite successful when it had happened in the existing “Resting for Infants and Toddlers Only” area.

We considered using other areas of the museum as well. Installing an exhibit of “comforters” in the front intro cases, as well as baby and adult pictures of celebrities so that kids could see some “famous” people when they were infants.

But were these ideas really an exhibit that would teach anything about early development? They were all we had to go on. It seemed to be a pleasant mixture of activities but what would it really teach and to whom?

February 1978

Days turned into weeks, and still no real decisions were made. In the middle of all this one of the museum’s major exhibit designers died, and the February blizzards hit, putting us even more off schedule. Other decisions about the Wharf were being made and *Before You Were Three* hung in limbo.

Decisions about the exhibits to be included at the Wharf were being finalized. *Before You Were Three* had been arbitrarily approved as an exhibit to be included in the first phase of the Me Bay, a cluster of exhibits that dealt with life issues. Other exhibits slated to be part of that bay were *What If You Couldn’t?*, an exhibit on special

needs, and a Pre-School Special Education play space (which had been funded as a demonstration project, but was yet to be developed). The rationale behind this selection of exhibits was *Before You Were Three* would give the visitor some ideas about what happens in the early years of life, and visitors would also be able to observe young children (normal and handicapped) at play in the play space. *What If You Couldn’t?* would serve as an introduction to disabilities, show how children with disabilities cope with everyday experiences and allow visitor to become more familiar with some of the devices that have been designed to help children with disabilities. These exhibits would serve as an introduction to some of these issues only to be enhanced later by new exhibits on growth and development.

After looking at how the other exhibit bays were taking form, Mike and Elaine began to wonder if this was the best direction to take. Time and money were major factors. The three exhibits slated for the Me bay were far from adequate; there were other exhibits already developed on size, weight, etc. Mike thought that they needed to be incorporated somehow into the overall picture. Although the early childhood exhibit expansion had been developed as a single enlarged space to encompass several different activity areas, Mike and Elaine started dispersing them into several different areas in the museum.

March 1, 1978

What was now happening was unclear. One day you went home thinking you understood a program idea, only to return the next morning to find out that it had



Jeri (second from right) and the Girl Scouts.

ing how it all came together.

The next time I remember coming back was as a Girl Scout when I was probably eight or nine, or maybe it was some special programming for Girl Scouts Day. Then, the summer after that, I

had an opportunity through Boston Parks & Recreation to participate in July Jaunters which took place on Jamaica Pond. I had been to the pond maybe once or twice, but now I was here for a full week. I remember the nets, catching things and exploring things, and feeling like Jamaica Pond was a whole world away, even though it was only a trolley ride away from home. Understanding about nature and butterflies and birds and connecting with all of this stuff—it

was a stuff-filled kind of experience.

I liked the people at the museum. I liked the games. The thing that I was always disappointed in was not being a neighborhood kid. You got to play a couple of games when you came as part of a visit, but those other kids had badges and pins and other things that those of us who weren’t neighborhood kids didn’t have. I used to think, “That’s not always so fair.” But I understood that the museum was a place you could always come to no matter where you lived in the city. It felt like you were going someplace far away. It was the beauty of the environment of Jamaica Plain, getting off the subway and walking down Burroughs Street—the beauty of the trees and the big houses. You would come to the museum and then you would go across the street to the pond. It was only a half an hour away from where I lived, but there was just something magical about it.

I remember coming, probably as a babysitter, when the new Visitor Center opened. And that was, like, “Wow! What is this?” The big telephone, listening to kids going up

...I was feeling divided. I didn't want to stay locked into using just "Before You Were Three" information in my proposed exhibit on child development but I was hesitant to communicate that to Robie. We had come a long way taking things for granted, lacking a process to make decisions.

been turned into something else.

I was invited to attend a meeting with Mike, Elaine, Janet Kamien, associate director of the Visitor Center, and several members of D&P, to discuss new directions for the Me Bay. Mike thought it might be developed as a whole with no discreet, individual exhibit pieces, that somehow these exhibits could be interwoven.

I wasn't sure what that meant. (Later I found out I wasn't the only one who was confused.) I was uneasy with the current *Before You Were Three* as a separate exhibit and was now more interested in ways the exhibit information could somehow be incorporated into the play space.

March 10, 1978

Several more meetings had been called by Mike or Elaine, which I attended with Janet and members of D&P. Things were becoming more and more complicated. Janet and I were asked to make some decisions about *Playspace* and *Before You Were Three* before either of them had been fully developed or given their promised tryouts. At this point even the criteria under which the *Playspace* proposal had been written were being challenged. (One of our main issues was that this space should be designed so that it could be closed off and used by a special group while the museum was open to the public. We felt that without this, it would be difficult to protect the groups who needed privacy and a place to get away from the general museum activity.) These issues were discussed several times, but nothing was resolved. It appeared that Mike or Elaine had a master plan in mind

and somehow wanted us to change our minds and agree to what they were suggesting without really defining what they wanted. We felt we were being swallowed up and somehow coerced into agreeing to a design we could neither envision nor absolutely agree with.

After one particularly chaotic meeting, where it seemed no one was listening to anyone else and it left Janet and me upset, I wrote a memo to Mike and Elaine—a last stab at trying to get them to at least hear our issues—and left it in their mailboxes.

The very next day Mike called another short meeting. All earlier meetings had taken place in the Orange Room where small staff meetings were usually held. This meeting, however, was a closed door meeting in the office of Phyl O'Connell, the associate director. I had no idea what to expect.

I had given Janet a copy of the memo early that morning prior to my leaving for a three-hour workshop at a local high school. I explained my reasons for writing it. During the several meetings we had attended on the subject of the ME bay, I had remained relatively quiet while she had battled with Elaine, Mike, and D&P. I had joined in the conversation only to clarify those points I well understood. Much of what they talked about was beyond me. It stemmed from other Wharf planning meetings. Although I was still undecided about the final form of *Before You Were Three*, I clearly understood the criteria and rationale behind the *Playspace* and didn't want to see it lost in the shuffle.

At this meeting, Mike and Elaine's attitude seemed

Growing Up in the Museum

(continued)



Jeri (right), a July Jaunter at Jamaica Pond

and down through the *What's Inside?* manhole—getting really excited about something that was just truly different.

I remember thinking, "Well, is this still a museum?" It still was a lot of fun, and it was happening at a time for me when I was beginning to

think that education was not just learning answers. I was going to Grove Latin School. We learned a lot of answers in Latin School. That's all they wanted you to do: learn

a body of knowledge and spit it back. It probably wasn't until I was in the tenth grade when I was in the summer program with Jonathan Kozol and John Holt that all of a sudden the idea that you learned for yourself even became a possibility. And it was, like, wow, this is crazy. We're in a class, a summer program at the Commonwealth School, and we're reading books, and somebody's asking my opinion? What's this about? You're not supposed to ask me my opinion. You're supposed to ask me for facts. This was a new sort of learning that made me think, "Wait a minute, this is about me, it's not just to please somebody else." When you came to a place like the Children's Museum, yes, you could still learn facts, but you could begin to explore things just because you were interested in them, and real learning could happen from that—an astounding idea. I wanted to bring kids here to shake them up and to see that a museum could be a different kind of environment.

The next time I came to the museum I was a student



The lock box, left, and the baby photo spinner, right, in the Giant Crib were just plain fun. Robie Harris: "...they were something that every age loved doing, and they would spend time doing over and over."

to change. They had decided to let Janet and me think more about how a joint *Playspace/Before You Were Three* exhibit might be integrated with some of the other exhibit ideas Mike had. Discussions for any final exhibit formats would be postponed and no decisions would be made until after the April vacation week tryout, now back on the table and several weeks away.

Elaine and Mike's reaction to my memo: they "hear the issues loud and clear, and would make every effort to make them a reality." Tabling the discussions seemed best. Janet was leaving for two weeks on a travel grant to look at museum programs for the people with disabilities and I thought that if a major decision was made during her absence it would only cause more problems later.

teacher at Wheelock College. The new Workshop of Things had opened in the middle of the "open education" revolution. Here, again, was The Children's Museum offering another set of new ideas about what learning could be—learning from materials. Even though I had been a paper-and-pencil-worksheet kind of kid, I was totally excited about using Cuisinaire rods and materials as a new way of exposing kids and myself to new ways of learning. I come back and forth to the museum as a student teacher. At the same time, in my community, EDC (Education Development Center) was working with the Hawthorne House to create a place that ended up being the Highland Park Free School. We had an EDC in our own neighborhood. I'm in college, surrounded by new ways of learning and exploring with inner-city kids—kids who we were told were "culturally deprived." But now we could all have similar experiences.

I graduated from Wheelock and stayed in my com-

The Exhibit Develops

March 10, 1978

A decision had to be made about what the vacation week *Before You Were Three* exhibit would be like. Jonathan, our public relations person, had a winter newsletter deadline to meet and needed information to print. I called a meeting with Janet, Elaine, and Robie to discuss which of our proposed ideas could actually happen. Elaine was unable to attend but Janet stated that Elaine would have to live with our decisions since she knew time was running out. Janet listened to our suggestions, gave us an idea of what she thought D&P would be able to accomplish, and helped us write a description for Jonathan that she thought we could deliver. Janet planned to alert staff to our needs at her D&P meeting the next afternoon and arrange a meeting with them about our plans.

By this time I was feeling divided. I didn't want to stay locked into using just *Before You Were Three* information in my proposed exhibit on child development but I felt unable to communicate that to Robie. We had come a long way taking things for granted lacking a process to make decisions. Initially we were doing a promotion for the book and of course wanted to use the information in it. Although I thought the book was good, I didn't want to feel limited by only considering its approach to development. I had been honest in the beginning, saying I was interested in incorporating some of the ideas from the book into an exhibit, but now it seemed this was going to *be* that exhibit.

If what we were working on was to be considered a true exhibit, many things were lacking. My understanding of exhibit development involved a considerable amount of planning, perhaps with an advisory group, and including an actual budget and written job de-

munity. I taught at the Highland Park Free School and was reintroduced to the museum again as an adult, as a teacher. The museum's Community Services Department (CSD) offered a group of workshops for the staff of three Boston community schools, where your entry fee was an idea. Educators could learn from one another! On that first evening I met Bernie Zubrowski and had the challenge of creating a square bubble. I met Dottie Merrill and learned a lot about bookmaking. The next day I went back to my classroom armed with bubble solutions, straws and strings and created a bubble mess all over the place. I was completely sold. There were just new ways of thinking about everything.

I attended a number of workshops with staff from the CSD. I was approached by Liz Hastie who told me they were thinking about adding an early childhood person to their team, and would I be interested? I thought I was going to be a kindergarten teacher forever. But at the

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scriptions for everyone. None of these things had been included in the original Before You Were Three plans. I had worked on the project as part of my “Wharf time” time allocation and was the only museum staff person on the project. As the weekend program turned into a week-long exhibit, other staff were drawn into the project.

March 14, 1978

Our first meeting with D&P (Andy Merrill and John Spalvins) was disastrous. At this point there was no budget allocation. Elaine said money could be allocated from Wharf development funds since the project was a tryout for the Wharf. This was the first time the word “tryout” was used and it was to become my battle cry for the remainder of the project.

By “tryout” I was to understand the exhibit would be constructed as cheaply (in materials, time and labor) as possible. We later learned there would be many trade-offs in this plan, almost resulting in the exhibit idea getting totally lost. It was difficult to understand how D&P functioned: if something personally interested them, they would enthusiastically brainstorm suggestions; if they were less interested they would toss it off as “something that probably won’t work out.” Their time was the most important factor discussed: Why were we going to so much trouble for a nine-day exhibit? Elaine thought there was a lot we could learn in nine days and that we should try out as many ideas as possible. To my surprise, Elaine agreed to building some of the pieces. She felt it was worth spending the money to help us to learn more about the “final” exhibit.

We had all decided that it would be better to have all the activities related to the exhibit happen in the same area, so the sit-around was chosen. Andy and John were given a copy of our proposed exhibit pieces. After agreeing to make a floor plan of the sit-around, these were their suggested changes:

- The crib would now be approximately six by eight feet, the size of a standard sheet of Tri-Wall. For safety reasons it would need to be built of wood, since children might want to climb on it. We all agreed that for this first go-round it needn’t be raised, but could be built on the floor with a heavily padded rug to serve as the mattress. One side would be railed like a real crib, with the bars (two-inch dowels) spaced at four-inch intervals. Andy figured this would give the correct perspective. The other side of the crib would be a painted wall to simulate a nursery crib’s bars. One end would be high (the headboard) and the other would be low, approximately eighteen inches. This would be the end where the visitor would enter the crib.

- Safety concerns prohibited us from stringing anything across the crib, so anything in the crib would have to be attached somehow to the sides. Things to be included in the crib were to be discussed at the next meeting. Robie and I agreed to gather some prototypes or pictures of the other things we wanted to include.

We talked about the possibility of using a couple of pictures blown up to life size with the heads cut out so that people could stick their heads through the holes and see themselves in “fun house” fashion, reflected, as they might have looked as infants. Originally Robie had

Growing Up in the Museum

(continued)



In the mid-1970s, Jeri Robinson conducts a workshop for parents to show them how to assemble “Kits for Kids.” Kits for Kids were activity boxes that used ordinary household materials to create learning experiences for families at home. When assembled, the geodesic dome (above left), developed by Bernie Zubrowski and made from straws and paper clips, became a small greenhouse.

same time there was something that was drawing me back and forth: The idea of being able to go out and take new ideas to teachers and to get a chance to do what teachers never get a chance to do—play with stuff and think through how these materials and ideas get interpreted back in the classrooms. The invitation came at a funny crossroads in my life. It was 1973. I was ready for a change, but wasn’t quite sure what kind. I interviewed with Jim Zien for the museum job and for a job at the Eliot-Pearson Children’s School at Tufts. I got both jobs on the same day. Which way to go? Either road was going to lead me in a totally different direction. If I worked for Eliot Pearson, then I would be going into academia—teaching, starting off in a lab school. The whole idea of working at a university—working with students—was something that I had been engaged in for awhile and was quasi-interested in. But I was also tired of being in a fishbowl at Highland Park where, funded by the Ford Foundation and others, we had a stream of dignitaries, students and other people visiting all the time. You

hoped that the cutouts could be used to put kids into a sequence of pictures about sharing. I thought kids would probably miss the point, since they would find it funnier just to see themselves as babies. The others (Elaine, Andy, Janet, John) agreed, but also thought the sharing photos would be fun to do but expensive. Robie said that the cost of blowing the pictures up and mounting them would be donated by Henry Gordillo, the photographer of the book, if we thought the idea was worth trying. Everyone agreed it would be a great addition, and since there was a mirror available that could be borrowed from the existing Fire exhibit, we should choose two pictures to blow up.

The “Famous People” photos in *Before You Were Three* presented no design problems; the only problem was getting a decent variety of famous people. It had already taken over a month to track down the baby pictures of three people—all white males. We were concerned about getting pictures of women and minorities. Several were suggested including O.J. Simpson, Ella Jenkins, Buffy St. Marie, Julia Child, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and Muhammad Ali.

We left the meeting with a promise from Andy that he would get back to us later in the week with a floor plan and meanwhile we should work on getting the prototype pieces for the crib; identifying the rest of the famous people; and choosing the pictures to be blown up.

Several days later, Robie sent me text, edited from the book, that she thought would be appropriate for the exhibit. I thought it was too long. From past experience, I knew visitors read very little in exhibits; if there was too much to read, they just wouldn't do it at all. Exhibit text was to be hand written by the museum's graphics staff, so that during the course of the tryout, if anything needed

First Impression | Jim Zien

I felt certain almost immediately that Jeri would bring critical new personal and professional perspectives to the museum—a young, enthusiastic educator who had grown up in the black community and chosen to teach at the Highland Park Free School, which was then an active inner city center of educational experimentation, as was the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts, with which she also had a connection.

She spoke with great clarity about her love for working with both children and parents, which was something we'd begun to do in a modest way and wanted to expand. She knew her child developmental stuff. The fact that Eliot-Pearson was our main competitor for her made that clear.

Her Wheelock background came through strongly in her thoughts about creative teaching and learning. Her early childhood focus nicely complemented the experience of others on the staff at the time, like Bernie and Dottie who worked with older children. Then there was her joyful demeanor and great chuckle—traits sure to make her a pleasure to be around. Of course I was only around twenty-five years old at the time, so in truth I was making much of it up as we went along, proceeding on instinct. So what luck to have had Jeri walk through the door when she did.

—Jim Zien was the director of community services at The Children's Museum from 1970-1981

always felt you were trying to teach with lots of people looking over your shoulder. So I thought maybe I will try out a museum for awhile. I thought that it would be a short-lived kind of little jaunt. I'm not a great risk-taker, but there was something interesting about the museum. It would give me a chance to pursue a love of materials and a love of getting out and supporting what others needed.

I walked into an environment with some of the most incredible educators—some of the most incredible people—I have ever been with. People with great integrity and great vision, people who had all their own quirks, but they all had passion. That's what was so important to us—working in a place filled with passion. Passion about lots of different things. Mike's leadership was something that gave people courage to push, to try. He certainly had his ideas about what he wanted, but at the same time, Mike offered invitation for new ideas, and he supported them. It was clear he didn't always agree, but he wasn't threatened by other people's opinions. He was willing to let other

people dream, try, make mistakes, come back together. That was a real gift. No matter for how long or how short the job was, I thought I may never, ever get a chance in life again to have something and to have an environment where it's going to be safe enough to do that.

There was a philosophy about ways we wanted children and families to be treated. We didn't always know the answer, and sometimes, hey, it didn't work at all. But that was okay, because that's how life is, you know? You try things out, you can learn something even from the worst mistake.

My mantra was and is “Learning all the time,” no matter whether it was from mistakes, from the good stuff or from the struggles. Try to hear what others are struggling with and respect that. But at the same time, try not to lose the vision and the belief. At the museum I often felt like either it's going to work here or it's not. But I'm going to take this time and this environment and all of these colleagues and try to learn from their collective wisdom about what I was seeing and feeling. Could there be room for my ideas?



Robbie Harris described the Teddy Bear in *Before You Were Three*: “Little babies wanted to be held up to touch things, and parents talked to their children about these things....The teddy bear was hugged, loved and beaten. He was something to get angry at and something to throw. He ripped and Jeri sewed him up the first day.

to be changed it could be done right away.

Elaine thought it might be interesting to try a two-level text system: separate texts for children and adults, color coded or size coded, so that the right audience would be attracted to the right text. The children’s text would be easier to read, just a few sentences and printed in large letters, while text for adults would be printed smaller and go into more depth. This idea was modified. Robbie thought the book had already been written so that children could understand it in its entirety and didn’t see the value of writing more text. In the end the resulting text of a typical adult panel included directions for an activity (“Lie on your back, bat the beads”) followed by some explanation and perhaps a few questions to contemplate. These three sections were color coded, with the intent that parents would read to children only as far as would seem appropriate for that child. However, as it will be seen later, this didn’t always work out.

March 28, 1978

Our next meeting with D&P went without any problems. Robie and I had collected a series of busy boxes, cradle gyms and toys to give them some idea of what we wanted. Based on time and safety issues, John chose to build a creative things baby activator and a set of wooden beads at four-to-one scale. He thought building a busy box would be both costly and time consuming and that there were probably some things already built that could be adapted. A lock box that had previously been used in the old *Grownups & Kids* exhibit and a spinner dial from the old *Changes* exhibit could be used to create a busy box illusion. The lock box would be painted a bright nursery color while the seasons of trees on the spinner dial be changed to pictures of babies.

Several times the question of a mobile had come up. John did not want to include a mobile because of the danger of someone pulling it down on himself or another visitor, plus the fact that one good bat could tangle it forever. But Robie and I wanted to experiment and see what would happen. Plus there was a group of students at the Shady Hill School eager to be involved with the project. Andy and John were skeptical. Andy felt uneasy about the quality of the finished product. Would it be up to “museum” standards or look like a kid-made mobile? Robie assured him it could be made to any criteria he set, plus the project would be done under the supervision of the school’s art instructor to ensure the best possible outcome. She finally agreed that he could have the final right to refuse it if it was not up to snuff. I thought that if the kids went to all that trouble to make it, I would want to use it in some way in the exhibit, perhaps as a model of a mobile that could be reproduced at home on a slightly smaller scale. (Mobile-making was one of the activities I had planned for the week.)

Robie and I had talked about including several other components such as a slide show using existing pictures from the book to teach visitors about sharing feelings or independence. We brainstormed the idea of a “No” Show, but thought it would be too difficult to develop. A friend of Robie’s, who was in a media program at Boston University, volunteered to work on a documentary or perhaps develop a slide show concept.

It now seemed that very little of the book’s theme had been incorporated into the exhibit. We had the crib for exploring, but nothing for feelings, talking or walking. Robie wanted to incorporate text about walking by adapt part of the book’s text on the stages of walking into ten panels that would suggest activities and offer some background. I didn’t really agree with using still more text, but since there didn’t seem to be any other inexpensive solution, I agreed.

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April 1, 1978

My life was now consumed with calling parents to be “experts,” trying to locate more pictures of famous people and finding volunteers to work during the week of the exhibit. Suddenly it was rumored that the Boston schools were not going to have an April vacation week.

This would cause the museum a great financial setback. I made arrangements with a local Boston high school to have students come and work with visitors in the exhibit as part of their school work. Seventh and eighth grade students from Shady Hill Academy had also volunteered to come. When Boston then decided to close schools in

Playspace: Kids Play & Parents Learn

I knew from the beginning that this wasn't just about kids. It was as much about the parents as it was about the kids. And sometimes it was more about the parents. Because if we did things for them, then we knew vicariously their children would flourish as a result.

—Jeri Robinson, *Growing Up in the Museum*, November 2005

Playspace has been so important in terms of being able to watch families grow, and to get inside visitors' heads.

I remember once sitting in *Playspace* with another mother who was watching her toddler go up and down the slide, time and time again. I watched the mother's body language and noticed her getting more and more puzzled by what was going on. I sat down with her and learned that she thought the child had some kind of retarded behavior, because she was doing the same thing over and over again.

So we sat there and watched together. I was able to help her watch the child's body language change, to realize that this child was really mastering going up and doing the slide fifty different times. And that each time the child went up and came down she would watch other children and she would try it a little differently. The child's body language was changing. You could just see the power growing in this little, tiny being. By the end of that twenty-minute interlude, the mother began to understand that repetitive behavior is a strength, a sign of learning, and not a sign that there is something wrong.

I realized again how little parents often understand about normal development. If we hadn't taken advantage of the moment and the mother hadn't been comfortable enough to say what was on her mind, she would have probably stopped her child any time she tried to do something more than twice for fear that the child was getting into a rut versus being able to understand that there was real learning going on.

—Jeri Robinson
Excerpted from Philadelphia Stories Interviews,
May 1995



I remember being at “my museum,” The Children's Museum, in *Playspace*, which is a really wonderful early childhood space. It was one of those seminal experiences that took me a step back from being an administrator and a museum professional. I was there as a parent.

My daughter Emma was playing. She was a toddler. She was just playing and I was doing the parental thing: talking to other parents, getting engaged about what

they did as parents. I guess I wasn't noticing that Emma was walking up and down on this ramp about 100 times. As a typical parent, I was looking at my watch and I said to myself, “Okay, it's time to go.”

Then Jeri Robinson came over to me and said, “Look, in the past five minutes she's just learned to navigate this little ramp.” Then I was reminded to sit and watch what is a very simple learning process. But it was a real moment where Emma learned a real skill within the course of about fifteen minutes.

I think parents tend to miss those moments because they think what they're seeing is boring behavior, but really this repetition is what kids need to learn. From then on I looked at repetitive behaviors differently. I began to watch them for their progression—and they're little changes over time—rather than for being more boring moments that I can't stand to watch.

—Eleanor Chin
Excerpted from Philadelphia Stories Interviews,
May 1995

April, the high school volunteers became unavailable. Students who had jobs would be able to work full-time during the vacation; several others would not be able to work for long enough periods of time. The Shady Hill kids, however, were still available.

Several more famous pictures of people trickled in. Through Robie's personal contacts we got Julia Child and Tip O'Neill. Although Channel 2 promised several pictures of present and former Zoomers from the popular TV show "Zoom," they never materialized.

Much to everyone's horror, Robie had scheduled several television and radio appearances to talk about the exhibit. I didn't think we knew enough about the exhibit to get people excited about it, plus it would be installed for such a short time. Jonathan in the public relations office thought too much publicity was going out without his knowledge. He felt caught because some of the shows Robie contacted were venues he was saving for special announcements about some of the other museum projects coming up in the next few months. Jonathan: "If we bombard the media about this exhibit now, several months later no one will be willing to give us air time."

Since Robie had done a TV circuit the year before to promote the book, she already had contacts with the hosts of several local talk shows. I told Jonathan I wanted my involvement kept to a minimum since I had limited



Dolls and comforters on the walls inside the crib elicited powerful memories from visitors. Robie Harris records one story in her memo: "I had a comforter and I called it such and such, and when my mother threw it away, I remember how it felt, I remember how it smelled, I hated it when it got hot in the summer and my mother washed it, my father took it away and wouldn't let me take it on trips and I got angry." People started telling us what they named their comforters, so we started putting up a list that people read. Maybe some parents—and some kids—went home and realized it was OK to have a security blanket, that it was part of becoming an independent person.

Afterthoughts | Robie Harris

Excerpts from a memorandum to Jeri, Elaine, Janet, and others, May 2, 1978 (one week after the exhibit)



The thing that impressed me most about those nine non-stop days were the interactions that took place among the people who came to see the exhibit. It helped us understand better how people think about the first three years of life.

When parents participated in the exhibit with their kids, they immediately started talking about their kids' accomplishments in their first three years. Most parents remember their young children as being very competent. They would say, "You learned to walk and took your first steps, and we were so proud of you and excited

when you did that, and you were at Grandma Millie's. When you said your first word, you did it so well and so quickly." Parents have a sense of pride in their children's early development, which they communicated to their kids.

Parents stood all around the crib while visitors of all ages (from one-month-old babies to grandparents) were in it, and talk with one another. Who knows whether they were talking about the long lines outside the museum or the fact that their toddler was very tired, or whether they were reading the signs above the crib and beginning to talk about development, but there was a nice sense of camaraderie. This happened not only with women, but with men, too.

When we asked parents to sit on our "Ask the Experts" rug, hardly anyone turned us down. The parents ranged from being very good to superb conveyors of information about development. Sometimes we had five or six parents sitting with their infants. It gave parents a sense of status, albeit fleeting (five to ten minutes), about the job they had. Some parents did it for two hours.

People felt comfortable enough in the exhibit and in the museum environment to open up. A mother who had not been to the museum before, came with her two-month-old baby and toddler sibling. She sat down and immediately began to talk about the fact that she was feeling very upset about her new baby, (none of this was elicited by anyone in the exhibit). She had quit her

**By Friday afternoon everything was in place and ready for Saturday's opening.
Andy's comment: "Well, whether it works or not, it sure looks good."**

TV experience and wasn't all that comfortable talking about "an exhibit" I didn't yet think was an exhibit. I relayed my feelings to Robie who agreed we should stress the "tryout" quality of the exhibit. But she was somewhat disappointed that I didn't want to do TV spots.

April 12, 1978

I did, however, agree to do one, "The Tom Larson Show," on Wednesday, April 12, at 10 a.m. We went armed with mobiles, pictures of famous people, pictures from the walking sequence and the cut outs. We spent fifteen minutes talking about why we felt it was important for parents to know about the first three years of life. We talked about our hopes for visitor reaction to and experiences in the exhibit.

That afternoon when we returned there was finally a response from Delacorte. They had sent a check for \$250. According to Jonathan "this will barely cover the cost of the phone bill and stamps we used in corresponding with them." At this point nobody seemed to care. The exhibit pieces were finished and would be installed the next day. Robie's Boston University friend Debbie would help the graphics department laminate pictures

while Robie and I continued to gather supplies and be around if needed.

Everything was finally there. Robie had gathered a sampling of soft toys, stuffed animals, blankets, etc., that could be used as an impromptu display of comforters (security blankets) and she brought in a giant teddy bear that had been donated.

When it was time to set up the exhibit, we hit some snags. Putting the signs that gave directions about how to interact with the things in the crib was impossible because the signs themselves were too large to be placed in the crib once the pieces themselves had been installed. I suggested they be grouped together and attached to the wall with the hope that parents would read the information to their kids. The height at which the walking sequence should be installed presented another problem. After trying several heights, two and a half feet was agreed upon because we figured that older children on their knees could read it and act out the stages comfortably while younger children could still view it.

As a last minute addition, several stories written by children in my roommate's class were Xeroxed and mounted and used in the participatory section "Stories



The Sit-around was a refuge from the rest of the museum. People felt safe there with their infants and toddlers. Parents could relax and talk to one another. It was comfortable, less hectic than the rest of the museum, even on days when there were 700 visitors and the sit-around was wall-to-wall people....Once people feel comfortable, they're going to really think about what's in that room.

job and given her toddler all of her attention and this child was now very advanced, etc. But now she had a new baby, and because she has two children, she can't give her new baby half the attention that she gave her

other child. Would this new baby be OK? The guilt and concern she felt! We talked about the fact that this new baby was not just getting attention from her, but was getting attention and learning from the older sibling, and that no two children in the family are alike, their experiences are different, but they all seem to balance out one way or another. Other parents joined in with similar feelings.

This kind of situation happened maybe fifteen or twenty times during the week—sometimes in great detail, sometimes just a fleeting question. It happened with a nursery school teacher who had a young student who would have a tantrum every time the parent came to pick her up. She wouldn't want to go home. The teacher wanted to know what it meant. She also told us that the tantrums were diminishing, and we told her that it sounded like she was doing a very good job. But we asked if there was anybody in her profession whom she could talk to about this child and what was going on. Had she checked out the home? Turns out there was a social worker she could talk to, but it never occurred to her to talk to her, so she went home with that piece of information.

Many fleeting moments of people needing support in the jobs that they were doing with children. How do you support the adults who are with children, be it parents or professionals, teachers, social workers, nurses, doctors in the field—all those hundreds of professionals who are dealing with children?



Darlene Johnson and Tyler Ericson play with the lockbox—a descendant of the original lockbox from *Grownups & Kids* (1971) that later reappeared in *Before you Were Three* (1978) and finally again in *Playspace*.

and Pictures of You Before You Were Three.”

By Friday afternoon everything was in place and ready for Saturday’s opening. Andy’s comment: “Well, whether it works or not, it sure looks good.” Mike and Elaine came by to check out the set up and offer some suggestions. Elaine thought there might be some trouble with the walking sequence. If they noticed it at all, visitors would probably just read the signage instead of trying the interactive out. She suggested we watch it over the weekend and make any adjustments on Monday. Mike didn’t offer any suggestions, just said he’d be interested in hearing about our experiences as he was off on vacation and would unfortunately not return until the following Monday. Neither Mike nor Janet would see the exhibit in the “tryout” phase. I thought this would be a great loss since I would have liked to have heard their firsthand comments and criticism. Everything was in place, yet when I left on Friday night, I still didn’t know what to expect. I had decided that it would be best to observe awhile to get a feel for how people were reacting and then suggest changes as necessary.

Playspace Didn’t Just Happen | Jeri Robinson & Patricia Quinn



The History of Early Childhood Exhibits at The Children’s Museum

In their 1984 book, *Playspace: Creating Family Spaces in Public Places*, Jeri Robinson and Patricia Quinn call the *Before You Were Three* exhibit, “a ‘live laboratory’ for observing the audience for early childhood programs” and one that reinforced museum staff’s “growing awareness that there was a large audience of parents and young children who were eager to use the museum.” Robinson and Quinn tell the story of how this brief “live laboratory” developed into one of *The Children’s Museum’s* continuously evolving cornerstone exhibits in its new location on Museum Wharf.

Their book additionally situates *Before You Were Three* along the continuum of early childhood programming at *The Children’s Museum* over several decades. Just as the roots of *Playspace* are clearly seen in *Before You Were Three*, similar themes, practices and problems weave in and out of other museum exhibits both before and after.

In typical fashion, struggling to get it right resulted in multiple iterations of the exhibit, but *Playspace* ultimately revolutionized attitudes about serving family audiences in children’s museums—and later all museums—and became one of the most replicated exhibits in children’s museums.

The following passage from their book has been adapted for inclusion in this chapter.

—MM, Ed.

Indeed for me the biggest surprise had been its overwhelming appeal to mothers and the under-six set. I guess I had been “brainwashed” into believing that in order for an exhibit to be successful by museum terms it had to appeal to the eight-to-thirteen-year-old set.

The Exhibit Opens

Saturday we all arrived feeling nervous. It had taken a whole year, but we finally had an “exhibit.” Our helpers were three seventh graders. I gave them a run down of the space and suggested ways I thought they could interact with visitors. The only additional morning activity would be drawing baby pictures.

At the general Visitor Center staff meeting I explained what I thought would be happening in the exhibit and invited all staff to drop in. All suggestions were welcome. We were open for business.

Journal Notes

What follows are the notes taken from a journal I kept during the first days of the exhibit.

April 15th:

Believe it or not, it’s been wonderful. So many things have happened. We had a constant flow of people from the time we opened at 10 a.m. until closing at 5

p.m. (we closed a half hour for lunch). It was hard to observe without interacting; will try to do better tomorrow. We can make some good generalizations about it though.

- **Before You Were Three Intro sign:** Some adults and a few kids stop to read it all the way through. Most get through the first paragraph and the kids either want to come in or are ready to go somewhere else. I think the text is too long still.

- **Cut outs:** Work especially well for adults and older kids. Even babies look through the holes and cry out, “baby!”; parents really have to get down to look in and really let out a howl. Kids think it’s funny to see their parents in Pampers. One older lady told me that when she was a baby in 1902, she wore her brother’s hand me downs—hand-hemmed diapers and she used them in turn on her own children twenty years later.

- **Famous People:** Baby pictures are appealing to all. Little kids like Mister Rogers and Mr. Hooper. (A little German boy called out to his mother, “Sieh, Mutti, Mr. Hooper, Sesame Strasse!”). The Fonz and R2D2 and

History

We present this history to show that we did not start with a full-blown program. Any one of the following early models may be a way for you to begin.

In the Beginning...

Unlike the seemingly insolvable riddle of the chicken and egg, it has been the experience of The Children’s Museum that the audience of parents and preschoolers preceded the exhibits designed for these visitors. In response to this persistent audience the museum developed several precursors to today’s *Playspace* over a period of nearly fifteen years.

Grownups and Kids (1971)

In 1971, the exhibit *Grownups and Kids* was installed at the museum’s Jamaica Plain site to provide preschoolers with creative learning experiences involving arts and crafts, science or cooking, and to give their parents ideas for trying similar activities at home using low-cost, easily found materials. Parents and young children could participate in drop-in activities with or without staff help.

Grownups and Kids was situated in a small, semi-enclosed area on the lower half of a split level space. Designed as a prototype for afterschool daycare centers’ arts and crafts programs, this exhibit made use of tri-wall (a triple-layered, corrugated cardboard), and recycled paper tubes to create inexpensive moveable components, including: a central circular activity table, continuously staffed, with seating for 10-12 children

on paper tube stools; a bulletin board; a magnetized blackboard; a floor length mirror; exhibit modules with changing activities, such as puppets, a lock box, a stacking toy, tic-tac-toe grid, tangrams, mirrors, magnets, and puzzles.

What Worked...

Grownups and Kids provided focused activities with tangible results for adults and preschoolers. Repeat visitors welcomed the changing agenda. The exhibit also provided opportunities for staff to interact with visitors and try out new ideas. Many of the activities (some presented on take-home “idea sheets”) developed during this period continued to be used in subsequent exhibits and workshops. They also provided the basis for Jeri Robinson’s book, *Activities for Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere*.

The seven-year longevity of this exhibit attested to its popularity with its intended audience of parents and children between the ages of three and five. *Grownups and Kids* also drew considerable numbers of older and younger children.

...and What Didn’t

This exhibit was sometimes very crowded, messy and demanding on staff. A lack of running water in the area made cleanup more difficult. The activities consumed large quantities of materials. Some projects had to be left to dry and picked up later or carried around for the rest of the museum visit.

Staff often had to overcome adult reluctance to participate. Parents accompanied by more than one child needed a safe place for a baby or toddler to play

...with so much confusion and indecisiveness, it was a wonder that anything was ever accomplished.

C3PO are appealing to older kids, while adults get a real kick out of Julia Child and Tip O’Neill.

- **Stories and Pictures of You:** Mostly adults read the stories; kids reluctant to write stories but love the drawing. Parents share many anecdotes about their own and their kids’ early lives and sometimes help their kids write down a few sentences.

- **The Crib:** although it looks a great deal like a giant playpen, it has universal appeal. Kids of all ages have been using it, and it has a different feeling when different groups are using it.

The first people to use it this morning were a mother and two daughters, ages five and eight. The mother seemed to need it more than the kids. She really directed their play, almost play-acting scenes from when they were much younger. She taught them to walk; complained because there was no changing table or diapers or a feeding table or high chair; but in general was excited by the idea.

Crib has some problems for older kids—graphics need to be nearer to the objects, otherwise kids just play around but that’s OK, I guess. Babies get in a lot; I didn’t

even think they would.

In general things are OK. Some visitors are confused when they first come in. Some don’t relate the graphics outside the sit-around to what is going on inside. “Is this the nursery?” “Can I rest here?” “When is the movie?” “Is this where the magician is going to be?”

Things happen all around the space. Parents talk to each other as they observe their kids while a) sitting on the sit-around tiers and b) standing around the crib. People read! I can’t believe it but they do. Parents can and will read if they have the time to and will interpret for their kids. Heard parents tell kids, “Hey, look over here, let’s try the walking stuff.” (Parent had spent ten minutes reading the cards before calling it to her kid’s attention. Child has meanwhile been drawing.) Parents comment to us and each other about the crib. Think it’s a good model for infant daycare or for your home. Its dimensions make a good protected space, without seeming confining. People have suggested many program ideas: trace an infant or child size head to show how much they’ve grown since birth; oversized baby cloths to try on; a display of actual baby clothes to show growth from

Playspace Didn’t Just Happen

(continued)

or rest while they joined their older children in an activity. In response, the museum built a four-by-six-foot plexiglass playpen near the activity table. The pen was carpeted, gated and stocked with toys. Visitors began watching the new “baby exhibit.”

Before You Were Three (1978)

What Worked...

Before You Were Three took place at the museum’s former site in Jamaica Plain. By this time, staff was already aware of the pending move to Museum Wharf in downtown Boston and mindful of recording successful ideas with an eye to transplanting them to their new location. The centralized location within the building and the design of the Sit Around space served the exhibit and the audience well. Many components were moveable to accommodate people or activities. In addition to the school-aged children it was directed toward, this exhibit attracted and held large numbers of parents and very young children who used it as a home base. After exploring other areas of the museum, visitors would return to the relative quiet of *Before you Were Three* to rest, feed the babies and relax. People stayed in this exhibit, sharing family histories and experiences with each other and the staff, who discovered that parents had a real need to learn and talk about their children’s development.



Kits for Kids in the Parent Resource Room

...and What Didn’t

As with most short-lived special events, this exhibit was not in place long enough to evaluate in depth.

Through the Looking Glass (1977-1979)

Running concurrently with *Before You Were Three* and the end of *Grownups and Kids*, was *Through the Looking Glass*. This exhibit, designed by Signe Hanson, encompassed about one hundred-twenty square feet or one-third of the front lobby of The Children’s Museum Visitor Center in Jamaica Plain. Key elements in this space were:

- The Crow’s Nest—a climbing structure with small, lighted exhibit boxes containing collections of objects, such as horned toads, an armadillo, and of course, a stuffed crow and nest complete with eggs and shiny objects.

There was a philosophy about the ways we wanted children and families to be treated. We didn't always know the answer, and sometimes, hey, it didn't work at all. But that was okay, because that's how life is, you know?

newborn to twenty-four month size undershirts, for example.

Liz Levy does a wonderful “take your first step” program much to the delight of both parents and kids. She gets several kids and “tours” them around the walking sequences, giving them time to do the various movements.

Few people brought photographs but said they would on their next visit if the exhibit was still here. Said information in the paper should have had a reminder.

The people who really got into the activity of the exhibit stayed for fifteen to twenty minutes. Many were repeat visitors, especially those with preschoolers. We could have never predicted what people would do, but boy, am I pleased thus far.

Indeed for me the biggest surprise had been its overwhelming appeal to mothers and the under-six set. I guess I had been “brainwashed” into believing that an exhibit to be successful by museum terms had to appeal to the eight-to-thirteen-year-old set.

All week the exhibit was crowded. Several changes had to be made due to the crowded conditions. Lots

of visiting parents were interested and did present their infants in “Ask the Experts” as did several eight and nine year olds with their siblings. We gave up trying to make mobiles since the materials got in the way. Robie and I spent most of the week getting excited by parent interactions and visitors enthusiasm for the space.

My major concern, however, was we hadn't really created an exhibit about child development per se, but had created a unique support system for parents and preschoolers that we had been longing to create in the museum for a long time. It seemed that the combination of the sit-a-round spatial qualities, the subject matter and amount of activity complemented each other in just the right proportions. Of course, everyone wasn't satisfied, but still visitor comments were for the most part pleasant and helpful.

On Thursday, Liz, the coauthor of the book, had arranged for a team from the “CBS Evening News” to come and film in the exhibit. Because everything was going so well, I felt comfortable about their coming. My only hesitation was that the exhibit was scheduled to

- Table top exhibit cases.
- Cubbies with flaps that could be lifted to reveal artifacts from collections, such as dolls and masks.

Through the Looking Glass was an outgrowth of a museum-wide attempt to devise new ways to display and use its collections, encouraging children to discover objects while playing, in keeping with the philosophy of a participatory museum.

What Worked...

Continuing to use the collections exhibitions model, for the most part, the unstaffed “visitor discovery” concept of this exhibit went smoothly.

...and What Didn't

The Crow's Nest brought children too close to the ceiling light fixtures. Parents contributed to making it unsuitably hazardous by lifting very young children past the ladder designed to keep them at bay. This piece was enormously popular, however, and served as the forerunner to the Castle in *Playspace* where necessary adaptations were made to meet the needs of the preschoolers more safely.

On crowded days, this lobby exhibit became a real bottleneck. This problem was to haunt *Playspace* in its next two locations as well.

Playspace: Take I (1978-1979)

By 1978 it was readily apparent that the museum had a large mom-and-baby audience that was not just accompanying their older brothers and sisters. We had



Marcie Ericson, a *Playspace* parent volunteer, and her son Tyler fill it up at the exhibit's gas pump.

seen the success of *Before You Were Three* and experimented with other early childhood exhibit pieces and programs in *Grownups and Kids* and *Through the Looking Glass*.

A “place to play,” or *Playspace*, began its first real incarnation with the help of a small grant from the Bureau of Education for the Handicapped and the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The exhibit was jointly developed by Jeri Robinson and Janet Kamien and designed by Andy Merriell to increase the opportunities for integrating handicapped and non-handicapped children



Families in *Playspace* “sit around” on benches in the multi-level Toddler Bowl, a regeneration of the “Sit-around” in *Before You Were Three*. The modular seating and storage benches allowed staff to try out a variety of interior designs to suit the needs of parents, toddlers, infants, or special needs visitors.

Playspace Didn't Just Happen

(continued)

in the museum. Children under five and children with special needs were viewed as requiring a protected environment where they might play and explore at their own pace in a quiet area away from the often hectic activity of the other exhibits. It was thought that these two groups, needing to develop more mastery over mobility, could practice their gross motor skills in a safe place.

Key Elements

The elements of this first *Playspace* came together in a way that would still be recognizable to today's visitor. The focal point was, as it remains, the Castle and Slide, full of passageways and peepholes, and accessed by carpeted ramps.

Carpeted modular seating created semi-protected play areas for quieter activities and relaxation. Partially enclosed by a full wall with viewing windows to help screen out noise and heavy foot traffic, *Playspace I* was painted in soothing earth tones and designed to appeal to adults as well as children.

What Worked...

The modular seating and storage benches allowed staff to try out a variety of interior designs to suit the needs of parents, toddlers, infants or special needs visitors. The presence of the wall to separate and protect this audience was a departure from the usual museum design of open access to exhibits, but one that worked well for *Playspace* visitors.

be de-installed on Monday because the sit-around was booked for another program. Robie and Liz were upset that despite the exhibit's success it was still to be taken out so soon. Visitors too expressed their disappointment that it wouldn't be in longer. But that had been the agreement. My personal feeling was had the exhibit bombed, we would have been all too happy to see it go! Charlie Osgood and his team filmed for most of the morning and left with the promise that they would try to air it over the weekend before the exhibit closed or save it until the exhibit reopened either in the present museum or at the Wharf.

By this time I was sure the exhibit could act as a good support piece to the play space. With that in mind at several times during the week I tried out some of the other parts of the play space activities we had been considering (boxed activity kits, puzzles, blocks, mini workshops for parents). At the end of the nine days (I had worked for fifteen straight days without any time off) I had learned an enormous amount, was extremely tired, but ready to continue.



The Parent Resource Room in *Playspace*.

...and What Needed More Work

Once again, the location of this space, directly beyond the admissions desk, created a bottleneck on crowded days and discouraged further museum exploration. The Castle area was also too small to handle congestion and the Slide too wide, steep and fast with insufficient room at the base for safe landings. The storage benches with sliding doors seemed like a good idea, but seated visitors were repeatedly disturbed whenever anyone wanted to reach the stored contents. *Playspace I* had no on-site storage closet and the staff had to go all the way to the basement for some materials.

Reflections

As I looked back over the past year, many things became quite clear. First of all, with so much confusion and indecisiveness, it was a wonder that anything was ever accomplished. It seems that decisions were hardly ever made, but just “happen” due to a lack of procedures. I have come to understand my own frustrations—as well as the frustrations of those around me—in trying to get things done. There needs to be some clarification of roles and procedures to enable a more coherent route to exhibit development. But, in talking with colleagues from other museums where there are such procedures, things don’t always turn out as desired there either.

During the past year, I have learned to work with a number of new people and have also learned about limitations—my own and others. At this point in the museum’s history, the whole institution is working under considerable stress that makes it doubly more difficult to sort out the issues. Are creative processes always so confusing and trouble laden? Would a real set of procedures serve as a deterrent to creativity?

I have grown through this experience. More than once I had to stop and ask myself why I continue when I feel so negative about it. In the past, I might have just



A father and toddler in the Parent Resource Room. Baby changing tables in the men’s rooms were one of the changes made to serve a new and enlightened audience of families with young children.

quit, thinking nothing was worth such pressure and conflict. But I know to some degree I too am caught up in the dream. Ever since I came to the museum nearly six years ago the “move” had been discussed; now only a year away, I had the desire to see it through. Instead of

A pulley and bucket system lasted one week, as the bucket too often dropped down on someone’s head! Even more hazardous were the swinging doors at the entrance to the Castle Crawlspace. These doors had to be bolted shut to prevent the frequent clobbering of passing toddlers.

These “nuts and bolts” problems were relatively easy to deal with compared to the more intangible issues of staffing and meeting visitor’s needs. Integrating handicapped visitors with non-handicapped preschoolers proved difficult. Staff discovered that certain groups, such as mentally handicapped adults and non-handicapped preschoolers, could not easily share the space. Although both groups possessed similarities in cognitive or physical developmental levels, age, and physical size were barriers.

There were scheduling obstacles. The museum’s reservation system was designed primarily for school-aged children; preschool groups were booked only one day a month. The resulting waiting list for preschool group visits required a reexamination of this policy. Further, the Jamaica Plain site was not open to the general public in the mornings although the mornings were “prime time” for families who wanted to come.

This growing audience of parents with very young children required new services, such as places to feed and change their babies. They also looked for familiar faces among staff. It soon became clear that these visitors would require a good deal of adaptation on our part. A long-standing discussion was begun concerning

the degree to which the museum was willing and able to make the necessary changes.

Playspace: Take 2 (1979-1982)

In its new Museum Wharf location, *Playspace* was really beginning to gell. The familiar Castle and Slide were still focal points. The earth tone color scheme was carried through on the new, lower wall and gate. Carpeted areas and modular seating had become standard. Even the congestion caused by a location near the museum’s front entrance seemed familiar. The museum was now open to the general public in the mornings when parents and young preschoolers found it most convenient to visit.

A few significant new components were added to the 1979 *Playspace* model. The Parent Resource Room was developed in the fall of 1981 to put informational materials where the users were. Teacher and parent training programs were now an important part of *Playspace*, and it was desirable to eliminate the need to be constantly running back and forth to the museum’s Resource Center library. As *Playspace* grew busier, the Parent Room could provide a quiet area for reading, resting, nursing or small group activities without separating parents from kids who wanted to continue playing.

Playspace 2 audience was not only growing larger, it was growing younger. In recognition of the fact that all under-fives are not alike, a forerunner of the present Baby Pit was designed to separate the crawlers from the toddlers. Finally, large explanatory graphics at the exhibit

So I thought maybe I will try out a museum for awhile. I thought that it would be a short-lived kind of little jaunt.

running from the conflict I wanted to find a way to work it out, at least for myself.

Before You Were Three was the first major exhibit development I had worked on. I learned a great deal from the mistakes that were made during that process and hope with that new knowledge I am now ready to tackle the *Playspace*.

While working on this paper I discovered another developer at the museum was also trying to work out some of these same issues. As a result, we jointly decided

to encourage the developer group as a whole to unite and make the managers more aware of the frustrations and feelings that developers have about the existing exhibit development process. It is doubtful that it will make any impact on our most recent experience, but it gives us something to work toward for the future.

I am sure these experiences have been shared in other ways by other developers, but I'm hoping these experiences and what I learned from them will enable me to work more effectively in the future.

Playspace Didn't Just Happen

(continued)



Stroller parking: the nightmare begins.

entrance provided a necessary introduction to the exhibit and its purpose.

Onward and Upward

Playspace 2 also revealed problems that would have to be addressed in making the transition to *Playspace 3*. Some of the issues were:

- **Location:** To alleviate congestion and encourage visitors to tour more of the museum, it was decided to move the future *Playspace* up to the third floor where it would be encountered toward the middle of the visit. We solved one problem and created another when parents lugging babies and/or strollers up several flights of stairs found new the location inconvenient.

- **Crowd control:** Overcrowding was partially

alleviated by the new third floor location and a new schedule. First and second grade classes would no longer be booked into *Playspace*. Groups larger than ten were required to make a reservation; no groups were booked into times of heavy individual family use.

- **Respite:** The staff had observed that a family's museum visit was often terminated due to the fatigue or discomfort of its oldest or youngest member. If visitors could be provided with a place to rest for a bit, or to feed and change babies, perhaps everyone could enjoy a longer visit. We thought that bathrooms incorporating lounging and nursery facilities would not be a satisfactory solution because we wanted this respite to be part of the museum experience. To encourage the respite concept and a more peaceful "tone" to the exhibit, *Playspace 3* would be moved from its high traffic location. Exhibit seating and the Parent Room would also encourage break time. The staff would try to match appropriate activities to the energy levels for the toddlers' and parents' day.

- **Parent expectations:** Many parents, feeling the pressure to raise "Superbaby," were looking to the museum for answers. Resource information in the Parent Room was selected to represent many shades of opinion. It encouraged parents to learn from their children, each other, and a variety of sources rather than expecting "solutions" from the *Playspace* staff.

- **Staffing:** *Playspace* attracted frequent repeat visitors. The staff as well as the audience felt the need for continuity of personnel. *Playspace* experimented with several staffing alternatives to the museum procedure of rotating interpreters throughout the exhibits on an hourly basis.

Playspace: Take 3 (1982-)

The exhibit and resource components of *Playspace* were both firmly established before Take 3 emerged in 1982. The staff office as well as the Parent Resource Room were located within the exhibit. An increasingly popular and expanding *Playspace* now faced the dilemmas that come with trying to be many things to many people—a play area, a resource center, a respite area, a support center, and one exhibit among many in a larger institution.



Working with Preschoolers in The Children's Museum

Always be at the child's eye level. Remember he is small and to him everything looks much larger, and therefore more frightening. To let him know you care about him, bend down and meet his eyes when talking with him or giving him directions.

Remember that being in the museum itself can intimidate the child unless he feels at home here. When working with a group of children, you can help to reduce their fear by the look in your eyes, an outstretched hand, or the smile in your voice. Be soft-spoken; encourage the child to join the group and to feel welcome in it.

Watch your expressions—children do! If you do not smile or seem happy, the child will



notice immediately and respond accordingly.

Remember, the child may be used to non-smiling people, failure, or fear. He often feels a sense of inadequacy or fright. Erase that sense! Help him to a better self-image by making him feel how pleasant it is to be here. He will use your face as his indicator, so make it a good model.

Involve parents whenever possible. Remember that the parents and child are a unit; therefore, when the preschooler is involved in activities of the space, invite the parents to participate. When appropriate, give them responsibilities.

—Excerpt from Jeri Robinson's first staff guide written in 1975.

