



PLAYSPACE

**Creating Family Spaces
in Public Places**

Jeri Robinson

Patricia Quinn

A Boston Children's Museum Publication

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Jeri Robinson Patricia Quinn

Design: Hyla Skudder

Cover Photo: Richard Howard
All photos by Richard Howard unless
otherwise indicated.

Production: Dan Spock

Library of Congress Number: 84-071152

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PLAYSPACE was developed by the Boston Children's Museum Early Childhood Project with support from the Carnegie Corporation.

The Early Childhood Project

Pat Cornu
Elaine Heumann Gurian
Jeri Robinson
John Spalvins
Anne Dobbs Tribble

Leslie Chaflin
Brett Cook
Litty Medalia
Shiamin Melville
Maureen Murray
Amy Squibb

The Boston Children's Museum

The Boston Children's Museum was started 70 years ago by a group of university and classroom teachers who believed that direct access to real objects and materials could enhance learning and help children cope with the rich and complex world around them. The Museum is now a recognized leader in the development of non-traditional exhibits and educational programs, a source of workable educational materials and ideas for use in classrooms, neighborhood centers and homes, and a resource for training and consultation for teachers, group leaders and others committed to the education of children.

In 1979, the Museum moved from its location on the southwest edge of Boston to its downtown site. The innovative, participatory exhibits and interactive programs begun by director Michael Spock in the early 1960's were expanded to fifteen major exhibits, a permanent collection of 50,000 objects and a Resource Center of some 10,000 multimedia materials. The Museum has an annual audience of about 600,000 children and adults: 400,000 visit the Exhibit Center and 200,000 are served by the Resource Center. Traveling exhibits, publications and an active, well-traveled staff reach out to more distant audiences.

Exhibits, Resource Center materials, Collections and programs complement one another and are, generally, centered around one of six major themes: Americana, Japan, Northeast Native Americans, Boston's Ethnic Communities, Early Childhood and Science and Technology. These major theme areas reflect the strengths of our collections, the educational and ethnic makeup of Boston and New England and our mission to help beginners of all ages learn more about their world.

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Preface

Why a PLAYSPLACE program in a museum? It started as an experiment. We knew families came to museums. We knew they brought children of all ages. What we didn't know was if it would be possible to support and educate parents about their children when the primary motive for the visit was to provide a good experience for their children.

According to Edward F. Zeigler, Sterling Professor of Psychology at Yale, this idea of family support is now a national movement in its infancy. Bernice Weissbourd, founder of Family Focus, a network of support centers in Chicago, states, "Family Resource Programs have emerged because people feel isolated and lonely. They have emerged because parents in new family structures—single parents, divorced mothers and fathers, working parents, are reaching out for help."

This idea intrigued people at The Children's Museum and at The Carnegie Corporation. Could a "natural setting" where families gather on their own provide the support and resources necessary for contemporary parenting? In 1980 Carnegie funded the Early Childhood Project at the Museum to test the idea. The project is designed to create environments, programs and materials to promote positive parenting in natural settings. Project staff try to identify major developmental issues facing parents of children who use the Museum and to develop programs that address their needs.

Most family support programs are for families in crisis, connected to a particular school or center, or sponsored by companies for their employees only. The Children's Museum's PLAYSPLACE for parents and children under five is open to all Museum visitors, and after several years of tryouts and revision, the model works. Parents come, support one another and use the resources. They come often. By far the strongest criticism is that it is too crowded on weekends.

The solution . . . more inviting, warm, supportive PLAYSPACES where families can get off to a good start. We hope other places frequented by families, such as shopping malls, airports and hospitals will adapt the model for their users, making more family spaces in public places.

Introduction

PLAYSPACE is both a place and an idea. The place is an indoor play area and a resource center serving children from birth to five and their parents and caregivers. The idea behind PLAYSPACE is to provide informal parent education and support in locations where families naturally congregate for recreational or other purposes.

The creation of this special place took many years and the combined efforts of many talented and caring people. In its most recent and ever changing stage of development, PLAYSPACE may be found occupying a portion of the third floor of The Children's Museum in Boston. At the Museum, we're proud of our PLAYSPACE and we're convinced that both this type of place and the idea behind it should be more widespread. To this end we have written this book.

PLAYSPACE: Creating Family Spaces in Public Places presents the philosophy and goals of this parent/child program together with some basic techniques for reproducing such places in other locations. This book is written for museum administrators and staffs, architects and designers, early childhood educators, parents and all those who are concerned about young children in a variety of public places. We also hope to reach institutional directors, corporate planners and other decision makers who may not as yet be aware or convinced of the legitimacy of young families as part of their audience.

In the following pages we will discuss the need for PLAYSPACES and the issues involved in their development. We will point out problems, suggest solutions and identify resources. We hope that by documenting the history of the Children's Museum's PLAYSPACE and sharing our experiences, this book will present one example of how this type of program might flourish within an institution.

PLAYSPACE may serve as a model for other museums, shopping malls, libraries and even prisons. Many of our activity pieces and programs may travel well, almost intact, to alternative sites. However, to The Children's Museum, the replication of PLAYSPACE does not imply cloning. This book is not a manual for reproducing our model in every detail. We continue to experiment, and, like the young children and adults we serve, to grow and learn and change. Each institution must find its own path, inventing, borrowing and adapting along the way to the creation of its own new and unique PLAYSPACE.

PLAYSPACE

Children at Work.

Children are the exhibit in the PLAYSPACE.

Here infants, toddlers, preschoolers and children with special needs can find toys and activities helpful to their learning and growth.

Older children are welcome to watch and help these younger children at play.

Adults in the PLAYSPACE can observe children at various stages of development, talk with other parents, learn home activities, and explore resources for parenting.

CHAPTER 1.

Philosophy and Goals

Philosophy

The constant challenge of PLAYSPACE is that every part of the program, indeed every piece of furniture or toy on the exhibit should reflect our basic philosophy. This philosophy is not a rigid dogma about the "right" way to bring up babies, but a heartfelt commitment to a set of beliefs flexible enough to encompass many of today's child rearing theories.

PLAYSPACE represents the beliefs that:

- Play is one of the most important ways in which children, especially the youngest, learn and grow.
- To be an effective parent it is necessary to get to know your child. One of the best ways to do this is to observe and understand your child at play.
- Parents as well as children are learning and growing. Parents can learn from each other directly and by watching other styles of parenting.
- Parenting is a very complex, sometimes overwhelming responsibility. Parents need and deserve a variety of supportive resources and services.

- Places which already attract families are in an excellent position to offer these services.

Goals

To assist parents in their task, PLAYSPACE set forth the following project goals:

- To create environments, materials and programs which promote positive parenting experiences.
- To identify major developmental and social issues concerning the parents and young children who use the Museum; and to use these issues to develop quality programs for this audience.
- To provide a broad range of selected parenting materials (including books, articles, kits, training manuals, and activity sheets) which can be used in museums (and other public places), homes and child care centers by parents and other helping adults.
- To increase access to these parenting resources for minority, lower income, and special needs audiences and families in the Museum.

-
- To staff the Museum's PLAYSPACE with parents, early childhood students from high schools and colleges, day care workers and museum professionals in an effort to provide training for these populations and increase the spectrum of resource people available to visitors.
 - To offer these models, programs, and materials, as well as consulting assistance, to other museums and potential sites throughout the country.

CHAPTER 2.

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. If you are familiar with the Museum's history, you may want to skip ahead to Chapter 3.

In The Beginning...

Unlike the seemingly insoluble riddle of the chicken and the 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 PLAYSACE over a period of nearly fifteen years.

Grownups and Kids

In 1971, the exhibit *Grownups and Kids* was installed at the Museum's Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts site. The purpose of this exhibit was 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 after school and

day care 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 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

The central activity table was continuously staffed, usually by one Museum interpreter who was also receiving three hours of ongoing training per week under the direction of a Museum program developer. Activities included printing, paperweaving, water play and drawing, with emphasis on providing a "make and take" experience. For this earliest version of a space for young children, the Museum's operating budget was able to cover salaries, exhibit design and construction, and materials and supplies—most of which came from our own RECYCLE department.

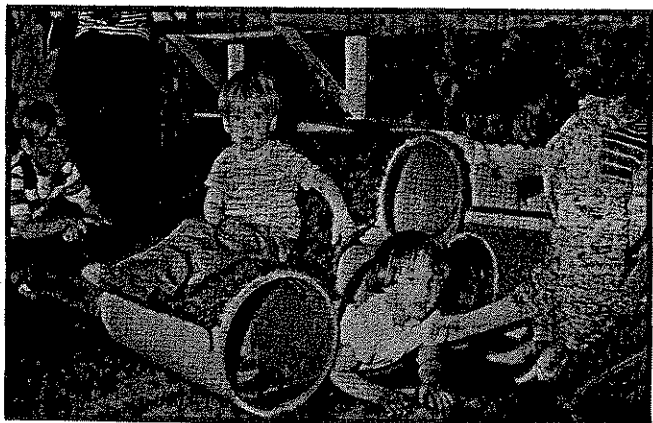


Grownups and Kids exhibit. Note the paper tube stools. Photo: Joel Hoo.

What Worked and What Didn't

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.



An early version of carpeted seating (paper tubes) also served as a play structure. Photo: Joel Hoo.

This exhibit was sometimes very crowded, messy and demanding on the 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.

The 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 or rest while they joined their older children in an activity. In response, the Museum built a 4' x 6' 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

A special nine day event in April of 1978 provided the museum with another "live laboratory" for observing the audience for early childhood programs. Authors Robie Harris and Elizabeth Levy helped the Museum's early childhood specialist develop an exhibit based on the ideas in their book, *Before You Were Three*. This exhibit explored the feelings, growth and development of children under three. Its purpose was to provide an environment where school-aged children could experience earlier stages of childhood and to spark reminiscences between parents and children. Through interaction with parents and younger siblings, older children might gain a better understanding of the younger child's behavior and capabilities, as well as a sense of their own accomplishments.

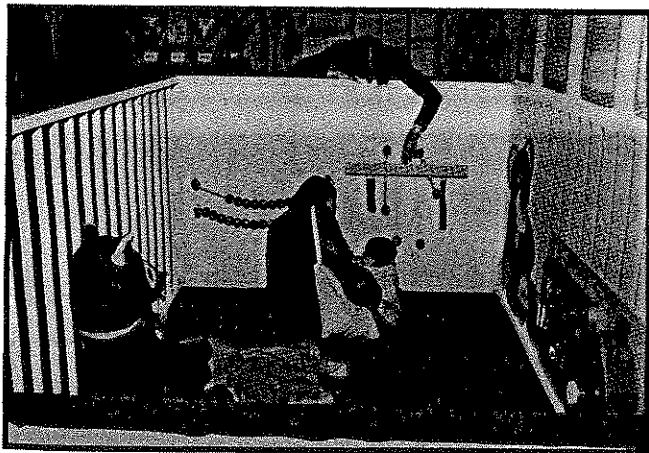
Before You Were Three was staged in an enclosed, carpeted amphitheater—a tiered six-hundred square foot area also known as the Sit Around. Some of the exhibit pieces that encouraged role playing and re-creating child development stages included:

- blown-up photographs of infants with cut-outs for visitor's heads
- a guessing game matching famous people with their baby pictures
- a wall of stories and pictures about children as babies to which visitors could contribute



This is what you saw in the mirror when you looked through the cut-outs in *Before You Were Three*. Photo: Joel Hoo.

- a giant crib/playpen with oversized mobile, beads, and teddy bear
- examples of security blankets, dolls, teddy bears and other friends
- a photo essay about learning to walk



The giant crib in *Before You Were Three*. Photo: Joel Hoo.

In addition, the staff organized the following activities:

- "Ask the Expert"—a half hour question and answer session conducted by parents or older siblings accompanied by a baby
- continual play with paper, crayons, blocks and puzzles
- simple mobile making for parents

What Worked and What Didn't

Before You Were Three took place at the Museum's former site in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. By this time, however, the 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 our new location. The centralized location within the building and the design of the Sit Around space served the exhibit and 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, these 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. The staff discovered that parents had a real need to learn and talk about their children's development.

As with most short-lived special events, this exhibit was not in place long enough to evaluate its programs in depth. However, *Before You Were Three* did reinforce our growing awareness that there was a large audience of parents and young children who were eager to use the Museum.

Through The Looking Glass

From 1977 to 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's 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.

- 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 Collections. The new models for presenting Collections tried out here encouraged children to discover objects while playing, in keeping with the philosophy of a participatory museum.

What Worked and What Didn't

The Museum continued to use the Collections exhibition models tested here. For the most part, the unstaffed "visitor discovery" concept of this exhibit went smoothly.

One problem was that the Crow's Nest brought children too close to the ceiling light fixtures. Parents contributed to making the Crow's Nest 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 the 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 1 (1978-79)

By 1978 it was readily apparent that The Children's Museum had a large mom and baby audience that was not just accompanying older brothers and sisters. We had 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 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 at 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 far 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 were coming together in a way that would 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 1 was painted in soothing earth tones and designed to appeal to adults as well as children.

What Worked...

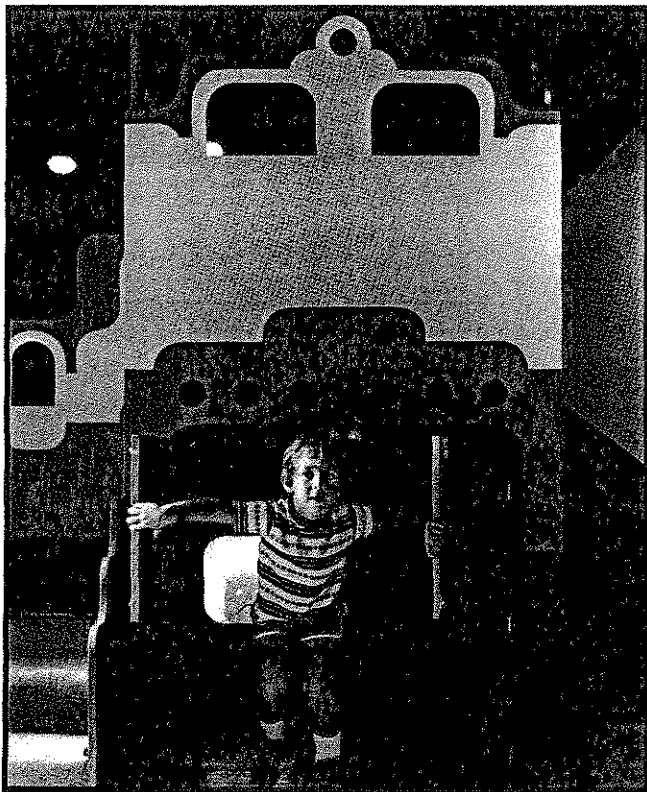
The modular seating and storage benches allowed the staff to try out a variety of interior designs to suit the needs of parents, toddlers, infants or special needs visitors. The presence of the wall to separate and protect this audience was a departure from the usual Museum design of open access to exhibits,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

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 1 had no on

site storage closet and the staff had to go all the way to the basement for some materials.

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 Crawl space. These doors had to be bolted shut to prevent the frequent clobbering of passing toddlers.



The dangerous swinging doors. Photo: Nava Benjamini.

These “nuts and bolts” problems were relatively easy to deal with, however, as compared to the more intangible issues of staffing and meeting visitors' needs. Integrating handicapped visitors with non-handicapped preschoolers proved difficult. Most special needs children came on Wednesday, the day the Museum reserved for the special needs audience. The staff discovered that certain groups, such as mentally handicapped adults and non-handicapped preschoolers, could not easily share the space. Age and physical size were barriers too great to be overcome by some similarities in cognitive or physical development levels.

Many people who wanted to visit PLAYSPACE 1 encountered scheduling obstacles. The Museum's reservation system was designed primarily for

school-aged children and preschool groups were booked only one day a month. The resulting waiting list for preschool group visits required a re-examination of this policy. Further, the Jamaica Plain site was not open to the general public in the mornings, although mornings were “prime time” to the families that 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 sought out a familiar face amongst the 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 (1979-82)

In its new Museum Wharf location PLAYSPACE was really beginning to look more like itself. The familiar Castle and Slide were still the focal point. The earth tone color scheme was carried through on the new, lower wall and gate. Carpeted areas and modular seating had become standard features. Even the congestion caused by a location near the Museum's entrance seemed all too 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 this 1979 transitional PLAYSPACE model. The Parent Resource Room was developed in the fall of 1981 to put informational materials where the user was. 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.

The 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, the

large explanatory graphics at the exhibit entrance (silk screened onto the wall) provided the necessary introduction to the exhibit and its purpose. (See photo facing chapter 1.)

Onward and Upward

PLAYSPACE 2 also focused the Museum's attention on 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 a visit. Thus we solved one problem and created another when parents lugging babies and/or strollers up several flights of stairs found the new 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 and no groups were booked into the 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 felt 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 this 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 Children's Museum for answers. The resource information in the Parent Room was

selected to represent many shades of opinion to encourage 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 the move onward and upward in 1982. The staff office as well as the Parent Resource Room were located on the site. 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.

CHAPTER 3.

The Exhibit

Just as the Children's Museum moved from one Boston neighborhood to its present downtown site in search of the optimum location for the institution and its audience, so PLAYSPACE moved within the Museum. Today's PLAYSPACE is located on the third floor of the Museum and encompasses over twice the floor space of its previous site.

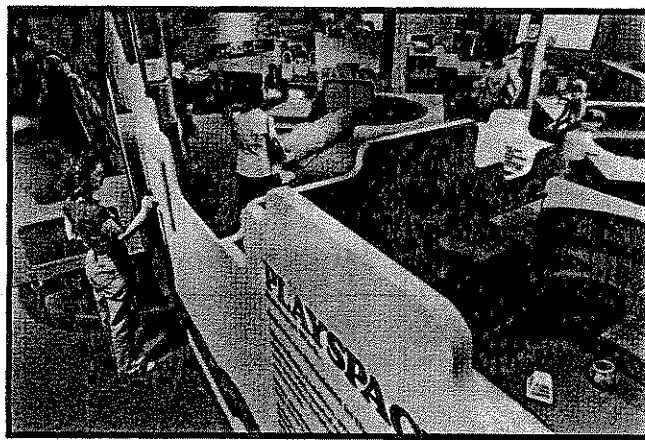
PLAYSPACE Dimensions

| Area | Square Footage |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|
| Exhibit Floor..... | 2000 |
| Parent Room..... | 500 |
| Office..... | 200 |
| Storage..... | 70 |
| TOTAL..... | 2770 |
| Total PLAYSPACE Public Space..... | 2500 |
| Total Museum Public Space..... | 30,000 |
| Ratio of PLAYSPACE Public Space to Museum Public Space..... | 1/12 |

Many of the activity pieces and parent/child programs of this third and most recent PLAYSPACE grew out of the experimental models described in the previous chapter. The following descriptions of the exhibit and resource components of PLAYSPACE, (and those of the program, audience and staff in the chapters to come) are based on our current model.

Exhibit Components

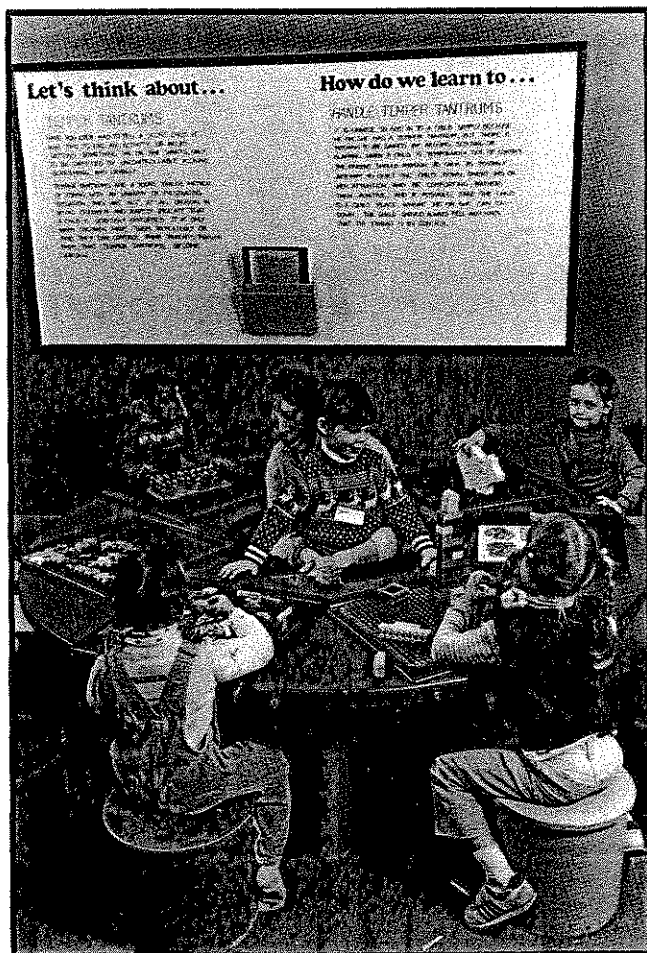
Wall and Gate: This barrier, varying in height, provides a view into and out of the space while preventing toddlers from wandering away. Passers-by pause to read the sign on the wall near the gate which explains the purpose of the exhibit and discourages inappropriate age groups. The gate purposely does not close automatically. Swinging doors can be a hazard to young children. We also wanted to signal parents that although they were entering a reasonably safe and secure environment, this fact did not take away their responsibility to keep an eye on their children's whereabouts and behavior.



Updating the daily activity board.

Stroller Park: Parents of young children are often burdened with a great deal of equipment. Just inside the gate is a place for visitors to leave strollers, backpacks, diaper bags, etc.

Activity Table: Two crescent shaped, vinyl covered tables provide a washable surface for arts and craft activities or puzzles and games. A staff person may sit in the middle to help out.

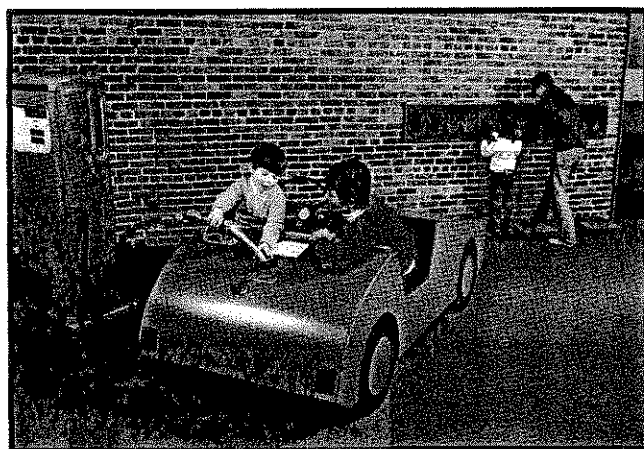


A PLAYSPACE intern at the activity table.

Hands and Feet/Measuring Mirror: The wall-sized mirror has large vinyl numbers pasted on its surface at one foot intervals. The six pairs of hands and feet of graduating sizes are cut out onto a rug covered board. Kids return to this measuring piece again and again to check out their own growth.

Car and Gas Pump: This realistic, if old-fashioned, pump and painted wood play car are longtime Museum favorites. Kids mimic adult

behavior as they fantasize driving or paying for gas. There is some dispute over whether real or imaginary seat belts are better for buckling up. Presently, cloth belts with velcro tabs that kids can manipulate unassisted provide practice in this important habit.



Car and gas pump/Hands and Feet wall.

Castle and Slide: This colorful, multi-level structure which dominates one-half of PLAYSPACE was originally designed to enable physically disabled children and non-disabled preschoolers to play together. The ramps, passageways and wooden slide provide developmental practice in crawling, walking, climbing, exploring and taking turns. The hidden rooms and parapets give children a feeling of being independent, big and powerful, but as the highest level is only three feet off the ground, mom or dad can always come to the rescue. Lighted built-in boxes with plexiglass fronts

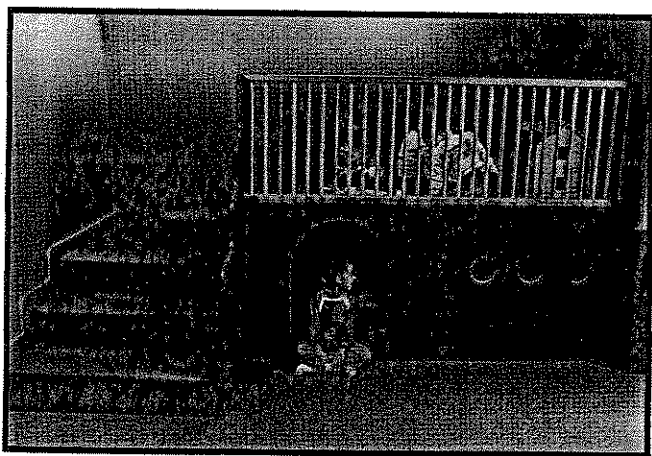


The PLAYSPACE Castle and Slide. Photo: Steve Rosenthal.

display objects from the Museum's Collections. The Castle defines the more active, noisy side of PLAYSPACE.

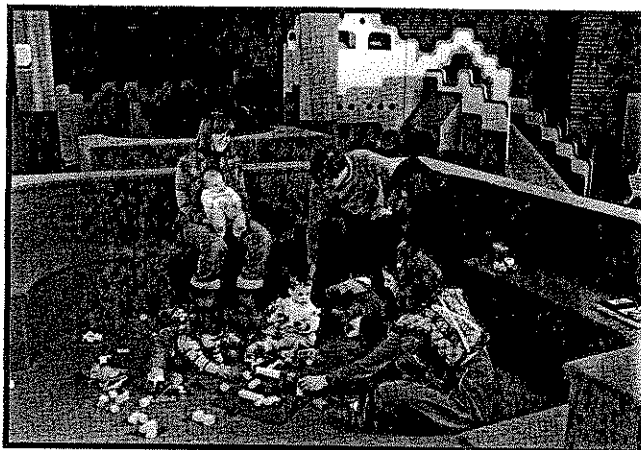
Seating: To the right of the gate are the more quiet, restful areas. A comfortable arrangement of low, carpet covered, moveable benches situated near a large window invites parents to stay longer, observe their children at play and talk among themselves. These benches were straight until the staff observed that people tended to isolate themselves—a family would claim “their” bench. Now, semi-circular seating results in more visitor interaction, the positioning of the seating attempts to balance a friendly closeness with sufficient separation to maintain personal space. The subdued look of this area resembles a living room rather than a nursery school. There is a book rack with selections for adults and children. In color and texture the setting is an extension of the floor to encourage people to use the floor as well for both sitting and play. This seating may also function as a table, a diaper-changing surface, a napping bench or a climbing structure.

Play Loft: A small, carpeted loft enclosed by a protective railing, with a portholed play space underneath, is ideal for hiding, playing house, reading or a game of peekaboo.



The Quiet Loft.

Toddler Bowl: A semi-circular seating arrangement sections off an area of floorspace for group activities, such as doll washing, building with Lego bricks, or a visit from a guinea pig. The seating barrier separates this area for toddlers' play from the more secluded infant area.



Parents and toddlers in the Toddler Bowl.

Baby Pit: This protected infant area provides a safe alcove for the youngest visitors. There is window access to the Parent Room. Mirrors, blankets, dolls, a tiny climbing structure, big wooden beads and other appropriate toys and materials outfit the area and help demonstrate to parents that babies are learners, too. This area might serve as a simple, safe model which could be duplicated in a cozy corner at home.



The Baby Pit.

Toys: A lock-box, dollhouse, magnet/chalk-board, blocks, colored disks for use by the window and a wooden railway mounted on a raised platform are some of PLAYSPACE's more permanent and popular toys.

More About Toys

Many of the toys visitors encounter in PLAYSPACE will be reassuringly familiar, thereby helping children adjust to being in a new place. A child

may latch onto a teddy bear or some other toy and travel around with it for the remainder of his or her visit. Blocks, beads, puzzles and dolls are traditional objects made from sturdy materials that have withstood the test of popularity through many generations.

To stock PLAYSPACE appropriately, the staff relies on its knowledge of child development, reads toy catalogs, listens to parents' suggestions, and pays attention to "what's out there" on the toy market, including the shelves of our own Museum Shop. However, we try not to follow fads or use items heavily advertised on TV. PLAYSPACE also generally avoids commercialized character toys. Even popular name brand products are not really necessary as long as good quality "no name" animal puppets and generic counting and alphabet materials are provided.

We steer clear of weapons and ethnically stereotyped materials and seek products that can't be construed as strictly for one sex. (Girls "gas up" the car and boys are enthusiastic baby/doll washers.)

Expense and durability are additional issues that concern the PLAYSPACE staff, as well as parents who must decide what to buy for their own children. Many of the toys on the exhibit floor are examples of attractive, multi-use, developmentally helpful items that families could purchase for under twenty dollars or construct themselves. Other larger and more expensive pieces, such as the Brio train set or the doll house, are here for all to share and are part of the attraction of the PLAYSPACE exhibit.

Sturdiness is very important if a toy is going to survive on the exhibit floor. Budget choices have to be made weighing the economics of investing in more expensive toys that will last versus toys that require frequent replacement. Few mass-produced tricycles, for example, could withstand up to four hundred riders a week, so a staff carpenter designed and built a wooden trike that has lasted three years with only minor repairs.

Some toys are more successful than others, and PLAYSPACE has had its share of hits and misses. A set of oversized plastic blocks was used more for bashing than building. (Interestingly, wooden blocks have not presented a similar problem.) The giant tinker toy was also turned into a weapon and had to be reserved for supervised play only. In contrast, a simple, inexpensive bubble

blowing toy, a plastic bottle in the shape of a bear, has proven to be not only fun for the kids, but also an effective ice-breaker for the staff to use in involving parents with play activities. To help save you time and money, and because we realize that not every institution has a workshop or talented crafts-person available, we have included in the Appendix a shopping list of our top toy recommendations.

Resource Components

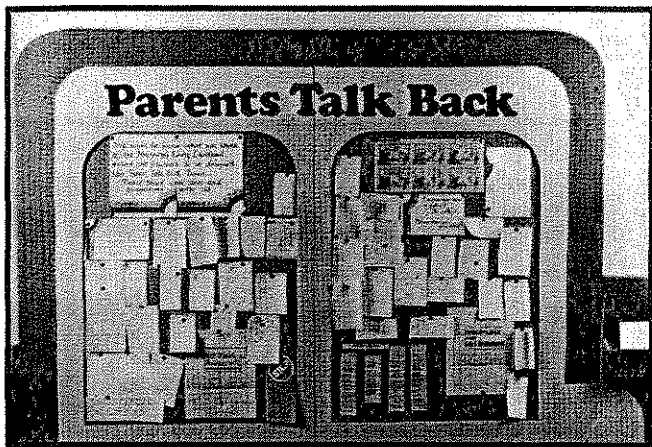
Parent Resource Room: This room adjoining the exhibit space houses a lending library of child development related books, pamphlets, activity kits (more about these in the next chapter) and toys. There are also free handouts available on topics of concern to parents. (See Appendix.) The coffee corner provides a retreat from the sometimes hectic exhibit area. Babies are changed here or nursed and comforted in the rocking chair. Other chairs are situated in front of a large window overlooking the Baby Pit. At scheduled times, the workshops detailed in the "Program" chapter are held in this room.

Office: The staff office is located adjacent to the Parent Room to facilitate interaction among staff, parents and children.

Bulletin Boards: Presenting child care issues in a non-didactic way and obtaining audience feedback are top priorities of PLAYSPACE. The chapters on our audience and programs contain more detail about our methods. However, in this discussion of the exhibit's physical set-up, the importance of the familiar and inexpensive bulletin board should be noted. Bulletin boards are "two-way streets" for the PLAYSPACE audience and staff.

- *The What's Up Board* focuses monthly on such topics as traveling with children or children's fears.
- *The Let's Think About Board*, written by the museum staff, provides information (also available to take home) on issues such as sharing, temper tantrums and discipline.

- *The Parents Talk Back Board* is the place where parents do just that in the form of notes sharing their opinions and problems or responding to a Question of the Month such as, "What child or parent-related product would you like to invent or design?"



The Parents Talk Back Board.

Operation and Upkeep

Because PLAYSPACE is part of a larger organization the staff has a good deal of support in maintaining the physical space. Building Operations is in charge of general daily maintenance tasks, such as temperature control, vacuuming and emptying wastebaskets. The PLAYSPACE staff still needs to patrol the space daily, checking for messy or potentially hazardous objects left behind on the floor. At the start of each day, exhibit interpreters have regular chores, such as spot cleaning, checking to see if outlet covers are in place, and setting up activities. The staff also has to clean up after workshop activities and wash the exhibit toys and doll clothes regularly.

The Children's Museum's Design and Production department builds, repairs, paints (and repaints) the exhibit pieces and signs. If your institution does not have a carpentry shop, some thought will have to be given to the problem of where painting and repairs will take place and where tools can be stored.

A large, preferably locked closet is necessary for organized storage of toys and other materials. A system where toys are boxed and labelled according to use or age group is, of course, more helpful than a messy toy box. At PLAYSPACE, supplies are ordered and toys purchased, as needed, by the

senior staff. A major inventory is undertaken at least once a year.

Unfinished Business

It is important to stress, especially for those that are just starting to create PLAYSPACES of their own, that this space is never really finished. Some decisions do not result in solutions, only trade-offs. On-site offices, for example, lead to better public/staff interaction *and* more noisy interruptions.

We still struggle with such problems as lack of running water on the site and overcrowding or underutilization at different times. The staff is often spread too thin and the Parent Room could be twice its size to accommodate its multiple, often competing functions.

Our long "wish list" includes kitchen facilities, a washer/dryer, a separate room for workshops, and more appropriately designed bathrooms closer to the exhibit. While waiting for our wishes to come true, however, PLAYSPACE continues to listen to its audience, try out new ideas, make mistakes, and, we hope, improve.

CHAPTER 4.

The Program

Over the years, the staff has developed activities, workshops and special events which make up the multiple programs of PLAYSPACE. However, we still consider our visitors to be our most important program. What happens on the space, what children do and what parents do, IS the program.

At Work and Play on PLAYSPACE

PLAYSPACE offers young children a place to do the serious work of childhood—playing and growing. PLAYSPACE offers parents a place and an opportunity to take another look at the spontaneous, independent or interactive, “everyday” behavior of their children and to reflect on it in the company of other parents and children. Here are two examples of people creating their own program during a morning’s visit to PLAYSPACE.

Mom and Toddler

Twenty-one month old Yasu and his mother, Tomoko have been visiting PLAYSPACE at least once a week for well over a year. In addition to volunteering one day a week, Tomoko has been coming regularly to a Friday morning doll-making workshop. For most of the two-hour visit Yasu occupies himself happily and with great self-direction in the play area while his mom sews in the Parent Room. Both mother and child feel

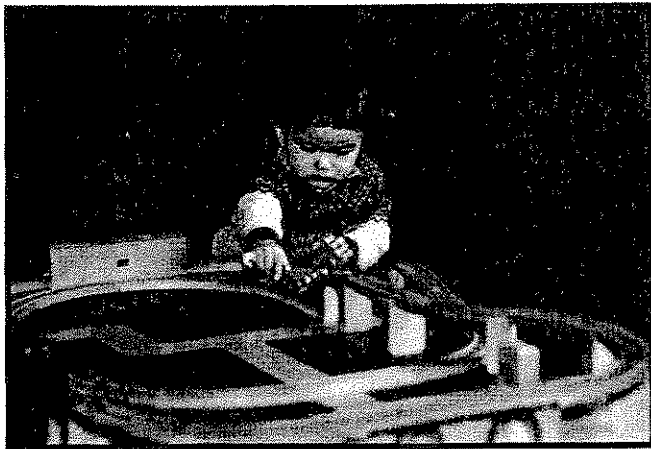
secure and familiar enough with PLAYSPACE to “do their own thing” with only occasional reunions.

At no time, however, is Yasu ever completely on his own. The staff is always there to tie the laces on his Miki Mouse sneakers or give him a ride in the wagon. Other moms and dads are alert to the behavior of all the kids on the space and someone else’s mom will say, “No, no,” when Yasu throws his leg over the Castle wall. Of course, Tomoko still checks on Yasu periodically and he dashes into the Parent Room on and off for a reassuring hug.

This particular morning, Yasu’s visit begins with a minor upset. Yasu is engrossed in his favorite toy, the wooden railway, making soft “tooo, tooo” sounds and pushing the little cars around the track. Another boy rushes over shouting, “Mine, mine,” grabs most of the train cars and runs off across the room. Yasu seems bewildered for a moment, then, on the verge of tears, he clutches his remaining car and hurries toward the Parent Room. He stops before entering, however, and perhaps having decided that one car is better than none, he turns back to the track.

A mom has retrieved the missing cars and Yasu sits in the middle of the train platform resuming his play and sing-songing quietly to himself. Two new boys come over to the train and this time when one of them reaches for Yasu’s cars he hugs them close to his chest and waits till the boy loses interest and turns away. The remaining boy (a future diplomat, no doubt) holds out his hand and

asks, "Want some help?" Yasu hands him a car and they play together pushing their cars through the tunnel and occasionally colliding.



Yasu at the Brio Train. Photo: Litty Medalia.

After fifteen minutes or so at the train, Yasu climbs into the Play Loft where an interpreter involves him in a make-believe tea party. Yasu is so absorbed in manipulating the plastic cups and saucers that he scarcely acknowledges his mother when she comes over to place a nametag on his back. A minute later, however, he suddenly stands up, smiles at the interpreter and runs, clapping his hands, toward the Parent Room.

Tomoko is taking a coffee break. She gives Yasu a container of apple juice and rejoins her sewing circle seated on the carpet. Yasu leans over her shoulder, sipping his juice through a straw and watching the dolls take shape.

After this ten-minute nutritional and emotional "pit stop," Yasu heads out onto the exhibit floor once again and in the next hour engages in the following activities:

- returns to the train several times
- plays with Duplo building bricks
- looks out the window
- draws colorful squiggles at the activity table
- climbs around in the Castle and goes up and down the slide many times
- "drives" the car
- rides the "Sit and Spin"
- pushes the plastic shopping cart around the room
- takes a teddy bear for a wagon ride
- builds a tower of cardboard blocks and knocks it over
- returns to Parent Room several times to watch Tomoko cut fabric and to give and receive hugs

At one point Yasu chooses a book from the book rack and climbs onto the lap of a mother he has never met before. She seems surprised, but cheerfully reads to him. When this mom leaves with her own son, Yasu turns the pages of several more books by himself and then returns to some of his favorite activities.

When it's time for Yasu and his mother to leave, Yasu races for the gate, but Tomoko catches hold of his hand. As they go out the gate together, Yasu turns and waves back at the waving staff and says, "Bye-bye!"

Parent Volunteer, Toddler and Infant

Mary has been coming to PLAYSPACE on a regular basis for only about three months, but she has already become a Parent Consultant. Her Wednesday visits from about 11 to 3 o'clock are very busy because in addition to her volunteer duties, she watches over her two daughters, Anna (almost 3 years) and Helen (almost 6 months) who accompany her.

Mary explains,

I have friends who were volunteers before me and they recommended the experience. We find it keeps us sane to get out. I usually wander between the exhibit and the Parent Room straightening up, keeping an eye on the gate and my girls and trying to be generally helpful. People always have questions. I talk to a lot of mothers and I enjoy that. I bring healthy snacks and we eat as we get hungry. I like to stick to PLAYSPACE, but when I'm not working and Anna wants to explore, I can

put Helen in a backpack and follow Anna to other parts of the Museum.

As Mary makes her rounds, Anna makes hers, stopping at the various activities of interest to an almost-three-year-old. She takes off her shoes and socks and independently follows her own pursuits much as Yasu did. Over the course of the day she also has her ups and downs. "See that, see that!" she shouts triumphantly pointing to a tower of crayons she has just built. Later she has a good cry in her mother's arms when she narrowly misses closing the Parent Room door on her fingers.

Helen's day is spent being carried about in the crook of her mother's arm, riding or napping in mom's backpack or rolling and crawling in the Baby Pit, orally exploring anything she can reach. When Helen wants to nurse, Mary can oblige while also sitting and discussing various topics with other mothers.

Today PLAYSPACE is fairly crowded with approximately fifty parents and kids. Mary puts Helen down on the quilt in the Baby Pit under the watchful eye of a friend. Besides entertaining herself with her play and teething activities Helen also provides entertainment and education for the older children who stop by the Baby Pit to watch her, try to play with her or usurp her space and toys. The mothers of these children usually take the opportunity to caution them about what babies can and cannot do and consequently how the older child should behave around them.

After a few minutes in The Baby Pit, Helen makes a wonderful discovery. She sees herself in the plexiglass mirrored wall and becomes very excited. She pulls herself up on her knees and balancing on one arm, waves vigorously at her own image and beats her free hand against the mirror. Squealing delightedly, she also repeatedly bumps her forehead against the forehead of the baby she sees reflected in the mirror. Then Helen loses her balance and hits her forehead harder than before against the wall. Her distressed cry brings Mary running over to comfort her. Helen nurses again and afterwards rubs her eyes and appears ready for a nap. Mary places her in the backpack and continues her chores.

A Variety of Programs for A Variety of People

PLAYSPACE strives to offer programs that meet our audience's real and current needs. The staff identifies these needs through observation and visitor feedback as part of the overall Museum commitment to the "tryout and revise" method of program development. Meeting the needs of our audience has led us to develop programs for the following diverse groups:

First-Time Parents: Originally designed as a six-week workshop, this support group stayed together for twenty weeks! According to one participant, the group talked about "concrete baby-care issues, but more importantly, we could vent frustrations and share concerns without feeling bad, different or ashamed."

Teen Parents: Several adolescents, accompanied by their babies, work on the space while they develop their parenting skills.

Parents and Grandparents: Volunteers, most of whom have several years of experience on the exhibit, make up the Parent Consultant Program. According to their talents, these volunteers, such as the LaLeche counselor, may lead their own workshops. In an orientation program hosted by the PLAYSPACE staff, groups of local parents preview the Museum in an introductory tour unaccompanied by their children.

Babysitters: In cooperation with The Boston Public Schools, the Early Childhood Project devised a ten-hour babysitting course for 7th grade students. The course covered such topics as "Health and Safety" and "Talking with Parents."

Child Care Professionals: Pre-school workers in local parent/child organizations have attended seminars on issues ranging from bad weather activities to child abuse.

Community Groups: The Children's Museum staff organizes collaborative programs involving greater Boston area youngsters. A thirty-week pairing of the Learning Center for Deaf Chil-

dren and the Crispus Attucks Children's Center integrated hearing and non-hearing preschoolers who used PLAYSPACE as home base for their weekly explorations of the Museum.

Workshops

We also try to be responsive to our audience through our workshop offerings. From our two-way bulletin boards, questionnaires and comments, we learned that our visitors wanted:

- more parent/child activities
- more information about developmental issues, especially discipline
- more opportunities for working and single parents to attend workshops or special events

Our most popular workshops are activity centered and designed for parents and children together. Re-enrollment must be limited in order to give newcomers a chance. Drop-in weekend workshops are also extremely popular. The evidence of the numbers of working parents ready to avail themselves of such activities resulted in a reorganization of the early childhood program's staffing pattern to provide better weekend coverage. Because workshops in general monopolize a good deal of time and space in the Parent Room, we cannot offer them as often as the great demand would allow.

The following is a list of some of our past and present offerings with suggested organizational details based on our experiences:

Tot Stuff for Grownups & Kids

- Adults and children making and doing things together. Activities based on themes such as cooking and eating, water play, movement and dance and arts and crafts.
- Two groups one morning per week on alternating weeks for a total of four sessions apiece. Repeated three times a year. Not offered in the summer.
- 1½ hour sessions (10:30 am-noon).

- Cost \$5 per session for Museum members; \$6 for non-members. Fee based on one child and one adult. \$3 additional for a second child.
- 8 to 10 pairs of adults and kids if kids are 3-5. 6 to 8 pairs if kids are 2 years old. Reserve some free slots for community groups.

Tot Stuff for Parents

- A more sophisticated "make it yourself" games and learning aids workshop aimed at parents of preschoolers, family day care providers and other adults. Subjects such as reading readiness activities, puppets and doll making. Accompanying children play in PLAYSPACE.
- One morning per week; 4 to 6 week series. "Sandwich in" between major holidays (for gift making) or school vacation weeks.
- 1½-2 hour sessions (10:30 am-12:30 pm).
- Series fee plus cost of materials.
- Up to 15 adults per session.

Mothers Morning Out

- Discussion group in Parent Room to share knowledge and feelings about child development subjects such as breast feeding/weaning, sibling issues and discipline. Children play in PLAYSPACE wearing nametags to alert floor staff to parents' whereabouts. Parents also keep an eye out.
- One morning per week. Ongoing.
- 1½ hour sessions (10:30 am-noon).
- Began as fee based; evolved into free drop-in group. Refreshments.
- Up to 15 adults.

Survival Series:

- **Surviving the Holidays**
- **Surviving with Toddlers**
- **Surviving with Preschoolers**

- Whole family activities on different levels. Slides, samples, articles and other resources spread out for adult browsing. Things for grownups and kids to make and do; cookies, silhouettes, pendants, art projects.
- One weekend per month, on Friday evening and Sunday afternoon.
- Friday evening—3 hours (6-9 pm); Sunday afternoon—2 hours (1:30-3:30 pm).
- Free of charge.
- Open enrollment: 50 or more people may drop by.

Toddlers Take Over

- A special series of program events for and about toddlers, hosted by PLAYSPACE. Activities range from lecture-type workshops and discussion groups, to "Creative Movement," gymnastics experiences for kids 5 and under, to "How Do Your Children Grow?," a series of short films for parents.



A young gymnast during Toddlers Take Over. Photo: Lynn Whitney.

- Annual special event. One week per year (4 to 6 days) in April, to coincide with national

"Week of the Young Child." Daily morning and afternoon programs.

- Time varies daily.
- Free beyond Museum admission.
- Open, drop-in, for most events. Tickets (free) necessary to reserve space where limited. Event serves several hundred people.

Steps in Organizing a Workshop

1. Planning Ahead

- allow two months planning time
- repeat successes, but plan new offerings

2. Choosing a Topic

- focus on current and continuing child rearing issues, e.g. discipline; or follow seasonal topics, e.g. making holiday decorations
- solicit suggestions from visitors via bulletin boards, read evaluations of previous workshops, determine staff concerns

3. Finding a Leader

- "brainstorm" at staff meetings
- explore talents and interests of staff and volunteers before turning to outside consultants
- consider ability to work well with parents and young children as well as knowledge of field
- if budget is a concern, request workshop leader donate time

4. Publicity

- begin publicizing a month in advance

- post notices on exhibit bulletin boards (Most workshops will fill with this method plus word of mouth.)
- for special events with larger potential enrollments consider a free notice in local newspaper calendar section

5. Enrollment

- limit enrollment to eight to ten parents and ten to twelve children
- for popular workshops, encourage newcomers over repeaters
- provide workshop schedule and description with tear-off registration blank
- call to confirm enrollment

6. Scheduling

- check organization-wide calendar to avoid conflicts
- decide on single session or series
- time workshops involving toddlers for the morning hours
- keep length of session to approximately 1½ hours
- in choosing location, consider potential messiness and distractions
- pace active and quiet activities and include breaks

7. Materials

- use inexpensive, familiar, available materials to keep costs down and encourage repetition at home
- use non-toxic materials
- remember nutrition in choosing a snack

8. Fees

- vary according to budgetary supplement, but single fee to participant should include materials and refreshments
- offer discount to members
- provide some scholarships or sliding scale slots

9. Clean Up

- encourage group participation, but leader and general staff should be willing to pitch in

10. Evaluation

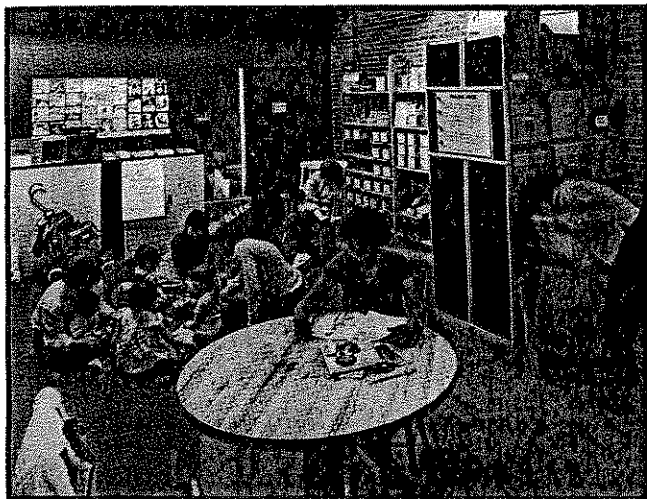
- use voluntary comment forms
- discuss what to repeat, drop or add next time
- remember to evaluate the overall experience for positive interaction and enjoyment as well as content

The Parent Resource Room

Parenting may be a lifetime venture, but according to one staff member, "Luckily, only the first twenty years are the hardest." In order to provide parents with continuing support, at least for the early years, the Parent Resource Room was developed.

This vital part of the overall PLAYSPACE operation is similar in concept and function to the Children's Museum's larger and well established Resource Center serving the public, staff and scholars. Regular PLAYSPACE visitors know they can return to the Parent Resource Room at different stages in their children's development and research the information they need among the carefully selected books, pamphlets, area resource listings and other materials available. (The Bibliography at the back of this book contains a sampling of some of the most popular titles.) The Parent

Room also contains a lending library of toys that may be borrowed by Museum members for two-week periods.



The Parent Resource Room.

Kits

A Children's Museum tradition which has been adapted by PLAYSPACE is kits. Kits are activity boxes organized around themes such as "Bathing Babies" or "Making Marks." The large "PLAYSPACE at Home" kit contains materials and instructions for sixty-six activities for young children. This kit could be rented and used by parents or day care providers and play group leaders.

Parents may also borrow the smaller "Kits for Kids" containing prototypes of learning activities that may be replicated at home. Subjects include "Bubbles," "Minibooks" and "Playdough." PLAYSPACE also has non-circulating kits based on collage making or rubber stamp printing, for example, that are designed for the interpreters to use with groups.

Kits are designed and assembled by the Museum staff, but the materials they contain are deliberately kept simple and inexpensive to encourage parents to create their own activity boxes. Jeri Robinson has summed up PLAYSPACE's attitude toward homemade versus manufactured playthings:

We're not trying to put the toy companies out of business; PLAYSPACE is one of their best customers. We'd like parents to stop and think a little before running to the store and buying something off the shelf.

Educational toys don't have to be costly. Sometimes toy replicas (of cookware, for example,) cost more than the real thing. You could spend money for a magnet set or just buy an inexpensive magnet and have fun going around the house collecting objects, like bottle caps, for your youngster to test.

You know your child best. Think about where he or she is in ability and interest level and see what you can come up with. Parents discover they enjoy investing more of *themselves* in their children's toys.

The programs PLAYSPACE has devised are many and varied, but it should be remembered that we have been developing these ideas over a period of ten years. Sometimes we "think small," as in the case of a workshop that brings a parent and child together for the purpose of making a toy. Sometimes our plans, like the goal of replicating PLAYSPACE, are ambitious and far reaching. All our programs, however, are attempts to better serve our audience.



The PLAYSPACE at Home kit.

CHAPTER 5.

The Audience

Over ten years ago when the Museum first began to provide an environment for children five and under, the play area was enclosed in plexiglass. As a result, soon Museum-goers were watching the babies. We had created a kind of "live baby exhibit." Today, of course, infants, toddlers and preschoolers are still a vital part of the exhibit, but we consider PLAYSPACE's primary audience to include the parents of these children as well.

Who Visits PLAYSPACE?

Early Childhood Project Statistics

Time period: July 1, 1982-June 30, 1983

Infants two and under visiting the Museum 14,605

Children on Tuesday mornings (reserved for preschool and kindergarten groups) 20,689

Visitors at 9:30 slot on Fridays (reserved for preschool groups) 12,189

Visitors on weekday mornings between September and June (primarily parents and preschoolers) 35,200

Of the general public, the Museum's largest membership population also visits PLAYSPACE in the greatest numbers. This group consists of mostly

white, middle to upper middle class suburban families, primarily well-educated mothers and their children. With today's more flexible roles we are seeing more fathers with child care responsibilities, but dads are still fewer by half than moms. Fathers and working families are seen more often on weekends and Friday nights, while at-home mothers are the primary morning users.

Of course, school groups as well as families visit PLAYSPACE. Approximately four hundred preschoolers a week come to the exhibit with nursery schools and day care programs from all over the city and state. Other children may also use the space. Siblings are welcome when the exhibit is not too crowded, as are high school and junior high school students in child development or babysitting courses.

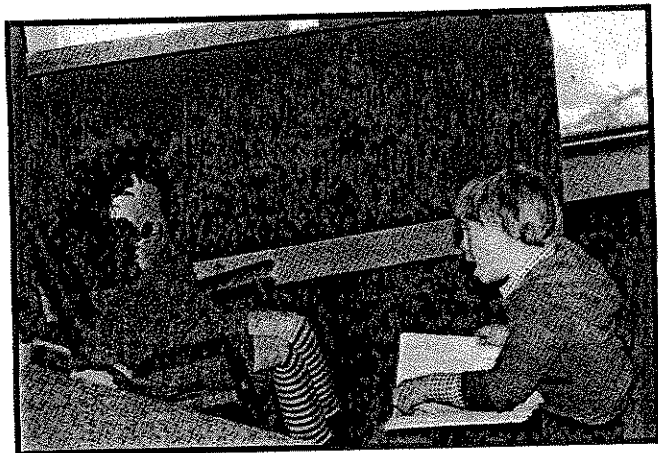
Audience Broadening

To continually expand and diversify the overall range of users, PLAYSPACE has made audience broadening a priority. Toward this goal, the Early Childhood Project works extensively with local day care centers, family day care providers and intervention groups such as teen parenting programs.

We invite local parent/child organizations, such as "Let's Take the Babies", a mother and child group that takes weekly field trips, to avail themselves of PLAYSPACE as an occasional meeting site. Certain members of the PLAYSPACE staff travel to

outside organizations and conferences to lecture and give workshop demonstrations. Teachers come to the Museum to participate in day-long curriculum enrichment training sessions, known as Saturday Seminars, and all visiting school group children are given a free pass to encourage them to return with their families.

As a result of such efforts and old-fashioned word of mouth publicity, each year since 1980 our visitor population has become more integrated racially and economically. In addition to the traditional museum mainstay, the suburban user, PLAYSPACE is now visited by families from Boston's Black, Spanish speaking, Chinese and other ethnic communities. About fifty to seventy-five regular weekly users of PLAYSPACE are low-income, minority or disabled visitors.



Nathan, a special needs visitor, reading to Raggedy Ann.
Photo: Early Childhood Center, Hanover, MA.

Scheduling

Over time we learned that to avoid the miseries of over-crowding it is necessary to require reservations for groups of more than ten. Group visits are also staggered so that no more than thirty-five or so preschoolers are sharing the space at one time. Reservation times and program activities are scheduled for certain days in an attempt to attract different segments of visitors throughout the week. A sign on the exhibit floor alerts parents to the fact that Tuesday and Friday mornings are preschool group days and therefore PLAYSPACE is less crowded on other days. However, the space is always open to the general PLAYSPACE audience of parents and their children under five.

Weekly Schedule

MONDAY—Museum closed except on school holidays and vacation days

TUESDAY—preschool groups 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.

WEDNESDAY—special education groups; parent/child workshops

THURSDAY—parent workshops

FRIDAY—preschool groups, 9:30-11:00 a.m.; mothers' drop-in workshop; free family night, 6 to 9 p.m.

SATURDAY—Families with older siblings appear more frequently

SUNDAY—same as above, plus occasional family workshops

The best laid plans of the PLAYSPACE staff may go awry, however, if it rains for a week. Bad weather brings people to the exhibit.

Why Do They Come?

Many people still stop by PLAYSPACE to watch the babies. Of course, some watchers, those in graduate school or college, may be more scholarly in their approach than others, but even the casual observer can appreciate the fascinating range of child behaviors that the natural laboratory of this exhibit affords. Parents, too, like to observe their children interacting with others. At the same time, parents can also enjoy the companionship of their peers.

People of all ages relax in the welcoming atmosphere of PLAYSPACE. For the under fives, PLAYSPACE is familiar and fun. In a space designed especially for them, the infant or toddler is a valued visitor, not just a nuisance or excess baggage. Many of the "no's" of traditional museum exhibits are taken away. Within limits, the kids are free to touch, move about, and make noise.

Teachers of preschool groups choose PLAYSPACE for their field trips because they know they will find a model of the safe and stimulating envi-

ronment they strive for in their own centers. Playing and learning continue with the added bonus of a change of scene that is both exciting and familiar to most preschoolers.

Older children who curiously venture into PLAYSPACE experience a kind of nostalgia for their own early childhood. (Perhaps grownups feel this as well.) Teenagers who work with the little ones on the space have an opportunity to play and be caregivers to younger children without being frowned upon.



A seventh grader participating in a baby-sitting course. Photo: Lynn Whitney.

Families find a respite in the midst of a hectic day in a place where the kids are safe and enjoying themselves. The Children's Museum is an example of a natural setting, any place from a park to a laundromat, where families might normally gather. Many parents might first discover PLAYSPACE on a visit to the Museum with older siblings. What they find in PLAYSPACE and what brings them back again and again is:

- an automatic peer group; a network of professional staff and companionable adults in similar circumstances
- information and resources that can help in parenting

Few adults have had training in becoming a parent and many only seek help when trouble has already arisen. PLAYSPACE is dedicated to the preventative belief that almost all families need infor-

mation and support in their day to day operation. PLAYSPACE is a non-threatening place to get real information at the right time.



Parents relaxing in the Toddler Bowl.

A visit to PLAYSPACE can be a therapeutic event, a chance to get out of the house that eases the isolation of much of modern family life. More than watching TV or a shopping trip to the local mall, a visit to PLAYSPACE is a family activity that makes parents feel they have done something good for their children and themselves.

Feedback

PLAYSPACE encourages its visitors to communicate with the staff and each other. The Parent Resource Room, described in greater detail elsewhere, provides a (relatively) quiet place for reading, socializing and small group discussion.

Parents leave messages on the Talk Back Board praising or criticizing some aspect of the exhibit. A lively dialogue often develops, as in the case of the continuing controversy that has come to be known as "Stroller Wars":

The Museum is not geared to parents with strollers. Heavy, sleeping toddlers can not be carried in a backpack by most women. This is especially the case if another is not asleep. The elevators should be extended to strollers. We are handicapped, too.

Strollers are wonderful as long as they are unobtrusive. I've watched active kids in places like Raceways tripping over them. Go

ahead and use the elevator but park outside the exhibits.

Really do believe there should be more access for strollers either via ramps or elevators, not just for handicapped. As a parent with two children in strollers I feel I would come back again only if this were changed.

Sorry to disagree, but strollers get in the way. I watched my toddler near stairs and toted all the stuff, too. Think about 60 strollers in and around the exhibits for small ones . . . lockers or a check space would help for all the stuff we have to carry in case we need it but the place would be a parking lot with all the strollers!

Please! We need ramps!

Very simple solution to the stairs problem: put up an incline/ramp to wheel up the strollers! Hope to see it next time we come. Thank you.

A great place for kids of all ages. My nine month old as well as my four year old love the PLAYSPACE. We'll continue to take advantage of your great creative exhibits for years to come. Taking a stroller up those steps is a real problem! A huge ramp would be less expensive than installing an elevator. Think about it.

Perhaps backpacks would suffice in some cases instead of strollers. The PLAYSPACE is wonderful—our very active 14 month old loves it.

Left the stroller in the car and glad I did. I had no problem managing my toddler without it and he had more fun too!

Parents also respond to a question of the month on the Talk Back Board:
"How should a child be disciplined, especially in public?"

Always discipline children quietly so they will not be embarrassed in front of their peers. Children have feelings also.

Discipline is a form of love. I love my kids everywhere with hugs, kisses and discipline.

Great!

Splendid. That's it.

Hitting is not discipline. Hitting only reinforces negative attitudes and poor self-esteem in a child. Hitting only means the parent is bigger and out of control.

I find it very hard to discipline my 3½ year old son in public. I'm afraid other parents will think I'm a witch. Hard as it may be, I do do it. I love him.

Most of us applaud. Keep it up.

Names and addresses and comments may be entered in the Visitors Log Book. The Resource Notebook, a large looseleaf, is designed for sharing information, such as the names and addresses of parent support groups or reprints of articles, like "The 10 things That Bother Mothers Most (and what to do about them)." The Networking Book, another looseleaf, has sections such as "For Sale" or "Needs Child Care" that are frequently updated.

Workshops are always concluded with voluntary evaluation forms.

Toddlers Take Over

April 26-30, 1983

1. Name:

Address:

Names and Ages of Children:

2. Are you a member?

☐ yes
☐ no

3. Did you know about Toddlers Take Over? How?

☐ yes ☐ PLAYSPACE memo-board
☐ no ☐ Friend
☐ Mailing
☐ Other

4. Which activity did you attend?

Please comment:

5. What other topics on child rearing and parenting would you like to know about?

☐ Discipline ☐ Self image changes during parenthood
☐ Children and the Media ☐ Relationship changes during parenthood
☐ Buying and making toys ☐ Single parenting
☐ Creative activities ☐ You and the babysitter
☐ Nutrition ☐ Parent support groups
☐ Child care options ☐ Changes in family structure (i.e. death, divorce etc.)
☐ Others (please list)

From last years questionnaire we learned that you prefer morning, weekday sessions and that you enjoyed activities that were geared toward parents and children together. We always welcome comments and aim to meet your needs.

6. Additional comments:

And, of course, we get lots of calls and letters:

I like this place so much I bought a membership. Even though the money situation at my house is very tight, I consider the membership fee one of the best investments I've made in a real long time. My son is four, an only child and we live in a small apartment so it's great for him (and especially myself) to be able to run around and play—especially in winter. I love it.

I am a student wife from India. My 2½ year old daughter and I are frequent visitors to PLAYSPACE . . . my daughter thoroughly enjoys all the activities that the space offers . . . but more than anything else, I have benefited from talking to other parents who come there . . . Invariably I return after a visit to PLAYSPACE with a renewed optimism and energy.

. . . [the population of our parent/child center] is made up of low-income families, many of whom have had limited exposure to the resources that Boston provides to families. The ability to bring our families, free of cost, to the Children's Museum where there is a safe and comfortable space for babies and mothers and a staff who understands (their) needs, provides an invaluable experience for our parents.

The 30 Most Asked Questions On or About PLAYSPACE

1. Q: Where's the bathroom?

A: Down the hall. We would prefer that they were closer. (Up-to-date floor plan handouts are helpful.)

2. Q: Do you have a diaper?

A: Diapers can be purchased at the admissions desk for 20 cents.

3. Q: Where do you get those plastic storage boxes?

A: Childcraft and they are expensive but worth it.

4. Q: How can I get a job here?

A: Volunteer! We have a very small staff and job openings are rare. For a possible interpretership, see the head of that program.

5. Q: Do you have any books on children's fears, nightmares . . . etc.?

A: Yes. In the Parent Resource Room.

6. Q: What do you suggest for activities for 3 (or 4 or 5) year olds?

A: See the activity file and/or the program file in the Parent Resource Room. See also *Activities for Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere* by Jeri Robinson.

7. Q: What programs and/or group activities do you have for infants?

A: We have programs for parents of infants where babies are welcome. We don't think infants need or respond to group activities.

8. Q: Do you have PLAYSPACES in other places?

A: No, but we offer assistance to people in other places who want to start programs like this.

9. Q: Do you know that that slide (toy, etc.) has been labeled dangerous by a report?

A: Thank you for bringing it to our attention. We have seen the reports, but this is a different model or brand or we have made certain adjustments.

10. Q: Why do you have an expensive train (toy, etc.) like that?

A: Because most families couldn't afford to own one, the kids can play with it here. Also, some of our toys are expensive because they have to be very well made and long lasting.

11. Q: Can I get plans to build my own Castle (loft, etc.)?

A: They're not available yet. We're working on it.

12. Q: Can we eat here?

A: There is no eating in the exhibit area, but babies can be fed in the Parent Room. In good weather there is a picnic area out front.



Nursing is allowed wherever mothers are comfortable.

13. Q: Where can I nurse my baby?

A: Anywhere you feel comfortable.

14. Q: Where can I change my child's diaper?

A: Anywhere in the Museum, but certain bathrooms have changing tables. Please discard soiled diapers in the bathrooms only.



One of several bathrooms equipped with baby-changing tables.
Photo: David Merrill.

15. Q: Why don't you open earlier?

A: We realize that a young child's day starts very early, but the Museum opens at 10 a.m. and we are part of the Museum.

16. Q: Can I go out and come back in?

A: Yes. Just make sure you get your hand stamped at the front desk.

17. Q: Will you watch my child while I...?

A: No, we're sorry, but that's one thing we don't do.

18. Q: What do you have for fathers to read?

A: We have books, literature and games especially for fathers. Just ask a staff person or browse in the Parent Room.

19. Q: Can I really visit PLAYSPACE every day if I want to?

A: We welcome repeat visitors. Inquire at the front desk about economical memberships and let us introduce you to some other people who come often.

20. Q: What do I do to take this book out?

A: Show us your Museum membership card and fill in a PLAYSPACE borrower's card.

21. Q: Will you send me information about workshops, toys, etc.?

A: We are not equipped to perform this service, but Museum members get regular mailings. We advertise upcoming events in local newspaper calendar listings and on the exhibit space. Free handouts are almost always available and we will make copies for you at cost.

22. Q: How do you think of all these wonderful things to do?

A: We read everything; we have years of experience with this age group; we welcome visitor suggestions and we are always trying out new ideas.

23. Q: What time is it?

A: (The Museum is practically clock-less or clock-free depending on your point of view. As parents of young children are often heavily scheduled, we try to wear watches.)

-
- 24. Q:** Do you have any juice or crackers?
A: Sometimes. We are eager to share when we do. Maybe we should start a cracker fund. Eating is confined to the Parent Room.
- 25. Q:** Don't parents worry about the cleanliness of the exhibit toys?
A: Sometimes. We wash them at least once a week.
- 26. Q:** Where else in this Museum can I take my young child?
A: Most exhibits have some parts that can be enjoyed by children under five. The directory on the bulletin board has the most appropriate exhibits circled in red. There is also a guide, "Exploring the Museum with Children Under Five" available at the desk.
- 27. Q:** Can I bring my playgroup here?
A: Yes. If you number more than ten you should make a reservation. Under ten it would still be a good idea to call ahead. If you are an organized, non-profit group licensed by the state of Massachusetts, you can come for free.
- 28. Q:** Can my child have a birthday party here?
A: Yes. Arrangements must be made through our Functions department.
- 29. Q:** Have you seen a little girl (boy) in striped overalls?
A: We'll look here and you look there. If we don't find her (or him) in the immediate area, we'll contact the floor managers who will alert the staff. We recommend that little wanderers wear a nametag saying, "Return me to PLAYSPACE." Don't worry, we've never lost a kid (or a Mommy) yet.
- 30. Q:** Who's in charge here?
A: That depends. What can we help you with?

CHAPTER 6.

The Staff

The PLAYSPACE program is staffed by full and part-time employees who plan and manage the program. Volunteers help run its daily operations. The twofold challenge of this project was to set up a PLAYSPACE that could fulfill its overall philosophy and goals without being dependent on many full time staff people. As a result, the PLAYSPACE staff has many complicated and overlapping responsibilities and individuals are encouraged to use their own initiative.

Rules and Responsibilities

Staff responsibilities on the space include:

- supervising and observing
- insuring safety and appropriate behavior
- establishing social relationships with children and adults
- acting as role models for positive adult/child interaction
- giving out information
- maintaining neatness and order
- providing toys and activities

- planning and implementing workshops, programs and special events
- maintaining the materials in the Parent Resource Room

The following is a list, accompanied by brief descriptions, of the types of personnel, both paid and volunteer, who participate in PLAYSPACE. Other institutions may, of course, develop other models based on the scope of their programs and the size of their budgets.

Project Director: A senior Museum administrator responsible for financial decisions and overseeing the integration of the project within the Museum.

Early Childhood Developer: Designs and implements new programs and materials as well as constantly improving existing ones. Supervises and trains exhibit staff, negotiates with Museum administration and represents PLAYSPACE to the exhibit audience and the community at large. (Developer is the term for a subject matter specialist. See Glossary.)

Project Manager: Responsible for scheduling, documentation and evaluation of the Early Childhood Project's programs and special events. Handles correspondence, the Project newsletter and public relations.

Program Manager: Responsible for the Parent Resource Room. Works with interpreters to serve parents, supervises Parent Consultants and conducts parent/child workshops.

Interpreter Supervisor: Hires, trains and supervises interpreters in cooperation with developer.

Floor Manager: Represents the Museum in direct dealings with the visiting public including information, complaints, safety issues and emergencies. Coordinates school group visits and helps run special events.

Interpreters: Participants in the Museum's entry level training program. High school graduates, college students or people in career transition who interact with the visiting public. They monitor the use of equipment, conduct activities on the floor and are easily identifiable by their bright orange aprons. The PLAYSPACE interpreter works six mornings a week and is trained by both the Exhibit Center and PLAYSPACE staffs.



A Museum interpreter playing with toddlers.

Volunteers: Approximately twenty regulars who are parents and/or grandparents contributing their skills in a variety of ways. They work behind the scenes on such tasks as mending toys, xeroxing or research. On the floor they are available as resource persons, interact with both children and adults. Experienced Parent Consultant volunteers may lead workshops.

College Students/Student Teachers: Help supervise the floor and lead adult and/or children's activities. They also help keep the resources in the Parent Room up to date.

Teen Parents: Currently four teen mothers receive a small stipend to work one morning each week in PLAYSPACE. Their children accompany them. These young families are "learning while earning" and observing positive role models.

Teenage Staff: Adolescents from the Museum's Teenage Work Program assist staff with a variety of activities and tasks.

Parent Volunteers

The first few PLAYSPACE volunteers were professionals with a good deal of early childhood knowledge and experience. They were also mothers of older children. As PLAYSPACE doubled its size and audience and the Museum staff suffered cutbacks, it became evident that more volunteers were needed and that they should reflect the multicultural diversity of the city.

We began recruiting volunteers from among our regular visitors. The parents who volunteered ranged in age from teens to grandparents, included fathers as well as mothers and represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds. (We also doubled the number of mothers who resembled the traditional museum volunteer profile.) These volunteers receive the benefit of Museum membership and are welcome to bring their children with them while they work. Many parents find their part-time unpaid assignments to be real "sanity-savers."

Training and Development

The training of the PLAYSPACE staff is a shared responsibility of the Museum's ongoing staff development program and PLAYSPACE's Early Childhood Developer, who is a specialist in her field. In general, training for PLAYSPACE is informal and based in part on individual skills and personalities.

New staff receive an orientation in which they become familiar with the history, policies and practices of the early childhood program, but they also "learn by doing" out on the exhibit floor. All staff are encouraged to view PLAYSPACE as a large playroom and resource center in which they are the hosts and hostesses. Like any good hosts, they welcome visitors, make them feel comfortable and see to their needs. (And like many a host, they may find themselves cleaning up after the guests.)

Although regular meetings are very difficult to schedule because of job and family commitments, informal meetings provide an opportunity to "see who we all are" and review safety and other policies. The staff would like to hold such meetings monthly in the form of "sharing lunches," but provision for child care is a problem even for PLAYSPACE. Staff can also communicate with one another through the Early Childhood Project's monthly newsletter. This newsletter contains updated information on what's happening within the program and alerts the staff to new resources.

For everyone involved with PLAYSPACE there is always plenty of reading to be done. The senior staff, of course, strives to keep current with the explosion of interest and information in the early childhood and parenting fields. Volunteers are encouraged to read and research in the Parent Resource Room library. Recommended reading for all staff includes *Before You Were There*, by Harris and Levy, *Kids Day In and Day Out* by Scharlatt and Cerf, and the "Growing Child" series newsletter. (See the Bibliography for more titles.)

Everyone involved with PLAYSPACE is viewed as learning and growing, not just the babies. Therefore, evaluation of staff performance is an informal, ongoing process. According to PLAYSPACE's senior developer:

The nature of the Museum, and especially the PLAYSPACE exhibit, is to refine constantly. We can't wait months or even weeks to iron out a problem. Our offices are located in the midst of the project and when the tone is wrong, I hear it. Then we have to make the time to sit down and discuss what's working, what isn't, and why.

The "Expert" Versus the "Good Listener"

The staff of any institution is the key to humanizing an otherwise anonymous place. In a highly interactive exhibit like PLAYSPACE, interpersonal skills are as important as a basic knowledge of child development issues.

PLAYSPACE doesn't advocate one "right" way of raising children and the staff doesn't offer instant solutions to complex parenting problems. Visitors don't want to be preached at on the exhibit floor, and staff persons who want to do direct teaching may be encouraged to develop a workshop on a specific topic.

This is not to imply that a compassionate staff ignore clients' direct or indirect appeals for advice. Supportive parenting education can happen in several ways:

- Personal opinion based on experience or reading may be given by a staff member along with the suggestion to seek out and weigh other opinions.
- Staff familiar with regular visitors or parent consultants may introduce one parent to another who has survived a particular phase.
- A visitor may be directed to the Parent Resource Room and helped to locate a hand-out or magazine article on a particular topic.
- A workshop or drop-in discussion group may be planned where the visitor can explore his or her concerns further.

Above all, it is important for the staff of an early childhood space to be friendly, approachable, sensitive and responsive. The attitude of the staff should make the visitor feel welcome and comfortable within the exhibit and the larger institution. Ideally, the most effective staff person would combine the best qualities of both the expert and the good listener. In the words of our program developer:

Parents of young children need to unload and the staff needs to listen, reassure, praise,

commiserate and share what other parents are venting. We tell people we're glad they came and try to help them cope with the everyday pressures. We offer them respite and renewal or just a cup of coffee and a smile. Years later a parent might call to report how a problem was finally resolved. But we aren't here to dispense cure-alls. After all, many of us are parents ourselves and we know how hard the job is. We're just here to point out the possibilities and reassure parents that it's okay to be less than perfect.

Interpreters' Questions

1. Q: How should I handle two kids fighting over a toy?

A: A tug of war over a toy usually occurs between children under three years old. Fairness and sharing aren't really in their vocabulary yet, so try to distract one or both parties or introduce a duplicate or similar toy. If the children are older, you could talk a little about taking turns.

2. Q: What if someone gets hurt on the space?

A: PLAYSPACE injuries are extremely rare and usually involve no more than a bump. However, you should call a floor manager regardless of how minor the incident may seem and he/she will take care of supplying ice or other first aid and filling out an accident report form if necessary. Remember, if two children are involved (instead of a child and a piece of furniture), the child who did the hurting will need soothing as well as the injured party.

3. Q: What do I do if a kid is getting into trouble and the parent isn't paying attention?

A: Your primary responsibility is to keep the space safe for all the children. If a child is doing something that threatens himself or others, you have to intervene at once. Then, when the situation is secure, and especially if there are repeated infractions, you can go to the parent and ask nicely for his or her help.

4. Q: I feel insecure about talking to parents. How should I approach them?

A: Try to remember that parents are "just folks" like yourself (a little older and a little more experienced, perhaps) and don't be intimidated. Some parents may even feel insecure about talking to you because they see you working on this space in a children's museum and may assume you are a child development expert. On the other hand, most parents won't expect you to have all the answers, but would appreciate a little friendly conversation with another adult. Be a good listener. Ask questions on safe or icebreaker topics, such as kids' ages, or comment on a particular toy or activity a child seems to favor. If a parent has a serious question or concern you can refer her to one of the senior staff and/or the Parent Resource Room. (One practical tip—making nametags for parents and children is a very good way to introduce yourself and welcome visitors to the space.)

5. Q: What if a kid has a "bathroom accident" on the floor?

A: Clean it up. Call a floor manager if maintenance staff are needed to help clean. The child is probably embarrassed or oblivious and the parent is most likely embarrassed, so try to handle the clean-up as quickly and unobtrusively as possible. (You may offer to watch the child while Mom or Dad rinses out soiled clothing.)

6. Q: How can I stop kids from taking things off the space when they leave?

A: If you've had a pleasant experience somewhere, don't you often want to take something home as a souvenir? Very young children don't understand about communal possessions and are therefore incapable of stealing. Parents often become upset, however, when their child won't relinquish a toy and starts to fuss or cry. Let the parents know that this happens frequently and try to find a

little something for the child to hold onto as a transitional object. We have a supply of colored ping-pong balls for this purpose. If the child is adamantly attached to a less expendable item, like a stuffed doll, it's all right to let him carry it off the space if the parent understands to return the object to the visitors' desk as soon as the child loses interest or before leaving the Museum.

7. Q: What do I do when older kids "invade" the space?

A: If the exhibit is crowded, you should ask them nicely to leave. Explain that PLAY-SPACE is for little kids and that bigger kids have the rest of the Museum to explore. Just a few older kids, especially siblings, are welcome to stay on the space as long as their activity level remains calm and they continue to be careful of the little ones.

8. Q: What should I do if parents ask me to watch their kids, or if they leave their kids without asking?

A: Say no politely, explaining that PLAY-SPACE is not for babysitting but for interacting—between parent and child, child and child, and parents and other adults. If you discover an unattended child, call a floor manager who will page the parents. Tone is important in all your encounters with visitors, young and older. Try to phrase everything in a positive way and never speak in anger.

9. Q: How do I know what to do when?

A: The activities you should set up on any given day depend on many factors. How crowded is the exhibit? How old are most of the kids on the space? How many adults are available to help? What do you feel like doing? To help you plan ahead, there is a list hanging on the storage closet wall of the groups scheduled to use PLAYSPACE each week. Use age-appropriate activities. If many two year olds are coming, get more riding toys or bean bags. For the four and five year

olds try some sit down table games and puzzles. Almost everybody likes to draw and color. Have fun!

10. Q: When everybody seems really happy and busy and everything is going along okay, what should I be doing?

A: The Job Board in the storage closet lists prioritized tasks, such as sorting and cleaning, that almost always needs doing. However, it's possible to get so caught up in the system that you forget to take the time to sit down and play with a child. If things are humming along, take advantage of the moment and read a book to a child. You can enjoy yourself and still keep an attentive eye out for any change on the space.

CHAPTER 7.

Making the Case

If you are in a position to advocate for the creation of a PLAYSPACE program within your institution, you will need to marshal certain facts and arguments and then prepare to meet the resistance. "What resistance?" you may ask. After all, how could anyone be against babies?

Are You Sure You Really Want To Do This?

At a recent roundtable discussion with Children's Museum administrators concerning the pros and cons of serving the early childhood audience, the following negative aspects of very young visitors were mentioned:

- kids under two don't pay admission
- parents and preschoolers arrive unscheduled at the same time as school groups
- they require nearby parking, backpacks and/or strollers and elevator access
- they need places to eat and change, nap and nurse
- some parents force younger children into inappropriate older behavior on school-age exhibits

- they come often, become too familiar with the institution and are demanding
- older kids don't want to be identified with babies
- their families don't renew their memberships beyond age six

On the other hand, the same discussion revealed an impressive list of positive reasons for serving this audience:

- more paid admissions
- the adult to child ratio is high
- they become members
- interpreters and exhibit planners can learn about learning by watching child development
- young children and new parents are impressionable and open to new ideas, and the institution that reaches them early on can form attitudes and behaviors
- they're coming anyway, so you might as well deal with them appropriately
- the Museum is building its future audience

- a change made to benefit this audience (more interactive exhibits, a respite area) may have a beneficial ripple effect on the whole Museum

Even this brief sampling of pros and cons reveals the dual nature of many of the issues connected with the early childhood audience. Is it good or bad that some visitors feel possessive and demanding toward your institution? Is it good or bad that they come more often and stay longer? By welcoming these youngest visitors, is your institution ensuring its future clientele, or will they become overexposed to what you have to offer, think they've "seen it all" and outgrow you sooner? As the controversy continues, however, one thing seems indisputable—programs for parents and young children are becoming more prevalent because our society is demanding this new focus.

The Need

The profile of the American family is changing. "Children and the Family, Report of the Governor's Advisory Committee," compared families in Massachusetts in 1960 with those in 1980, revealing the following facts:

- While the population and the number of marriages remained stable, divorces tripled.
- In 1960 38% of women with children under eighteen had entered into the work force, as compared to 53% in 1980.
- Although the number of live births decreased by nearly 40%, the number of births to unwed parents increased 92%.
- The number of families headed by single women jumped by more than 70,000 during the twenty year period; and families headed by single men increased by 10,000.¹

A few years earlier, these new and widespread changing conditions of family life prompted Kenneth Keniston to write that many parents suffered from

¹Armand M. Nicholi, T. Berry Brazelton, Urie Bronfenbrenner et. al. *Children and the Family, Report of the Governor's Advisory Committee*, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1980. pp. 4, 10.

... the sense of having no guidelines or supports for raising children, the feeling of not being in control as parents, and the widespread sense of personal guilt for what seems to go awry.²

Further research along these lines and years of experience and observation in our own Museum have led us to formulate the following assumptions about the conditions and needs of many parents and children:

- Parents of young children are often cut off from natural support systems by virtue of the fact that many no longer live in an extended family setting.
- New and changing conditions of family life (such as increased numbers of single parent families, working mothers, teen parents, older first time parents and higher unemployment) produce new and different child-rearing problems and anxieties.
- Natural support systems found in parks and playgrounds are useful—but only in good weather and only for those adults with free time during the day.
- As useful as spontaneous exchanges among parents are, they do not include materials, training and interaction with trained staff.
- Few public places welcome very young children and their parents despite the increasing numbers of both.

Other institutions and public places, which have also noted these conditions or felt their impact directly, have their own reasons for contemplating a response modeled on PLAYSPACE. Joyce Murphy, Superintendent of the Massachusetts Correctional Institution, Framingham, writes:

Sixty-three percent of the inmates incarcerated here are mothers, and seventy-four percent of that total are single parents. Visits are very important, and I am particularly inter-

²Kenneth Keniston and the Carnegie Council on Children, *All Our Children, The American Family in Crisis*, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978, pp. 4.

ested in designing a new Visitors' Center which will enhance mother-child interaction, and include play space for the many children who visit this institution.

The Milwaukee Public Museum, a natural history museum, is considering including the PLAYSPACE idea as part of the extension and expansion of its early childhood programming. The educational division is concerned with meeting the creature comfort needs as well as the programmatic needs of the young child and the accompanying adult audience.

According to a 1983 New York Times article, family support is an "increasingly significant movement" based on the traditional belief that "a healthy society rests on healthy families" and the contemporary belief that "government, corporate, volunteer and social service communities all have obligations to the family."³ Support for families by public institutions is an idea whose time has come.

Tangible Benefits

In addition to being beneficial to the families who use it, a program for young children and parents may be beneficial to your institution. One practical benefit might be increased admissions and memberships.

The Children's Museum keeps computerized admissions and membership records, but unfortunately we have not always asked the computer to record the precise data that would isolate children under five from the general visitor population. We do draw certain conclusions, however, from the circumstantial evidence that over the last four years of the Early Childhood Project's existence our membership profile has shown an overall increase in members having children under five. A 1981 survey showed that fifty-three percent of our members had children five years old and younger.

Our admissions desk is now tracking the 0-5 year old visitor category as opposed to the previous procedure of counting only the children 3-16. The figures for a sample one month period from mid-December, 1983 to mid-January, 1984 were:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--------|
| Total # of visitors | 28,181 |
| Total # of children 0-16 years | 15,334 |
| Total # of children 0-5 years | 9,604 |

These figures indicate that children five and under made up approximately thirty-four percent of the total visitor population and sixty-three percent of the total child visitor population. Reasons for the size of this 0-5 year old audience could be:

- the large number of this age group in the population today
- the increased mobility of young families
- the limited number of places that welcome this young audience
- the Children's Museum's exhibits and programs serving families with very young children as well as older ones.

Another practical benefit to your institution resulting from the development of a family support program may be the availability of broader funding sources. The current federal administration has fostered an economic climate in which the moral and financial burden of funding social programs has shifted back onto the private sector. The giving community—foundations, corporations and private individuals—is feeling the increased pressure to support and maintain social service programs. Funding decision makers are attracted to programs such as PLAYSPACE that are valued for their direct service and preventative aspects. A program focused on families is an asset for museums and other institutions seeking the support of funding sources with a strong social service commitment.

A cautionary word: even though it is easier to maintain a relationship with a contributor than to establish one in the first place, many funding sources are more willing to provide start-up costs for a new program than to contribute to an ongoing program. Once you have received an initial grant, think about how your institution will be able to sustain the program, on its own a few years down the road. Also, don't become totally discouraged about government as a source of funding, especially state

³Nadine Brogan, "Quiet Movement Aids Families in Crisis," The New York Times, (May 23, 1983), p. B 12.

and local organizations. Check the Bibliography at the back of this book for some suggested readings in this area.

Intangible Benefits

Some benefits accompanying the presence of young visitors in your institution may be difficult to quantify. Such rewards can be measured only in the loyalty and enthusiasm that PLAYSPACE engenders among the people who work and play there. The points raised in the following letter from a parent are typical of the positive feedback PLAYSPACE receives:

Dear Jeri,
I thought it high time to write and tell you how much my children have enjoyed PLAYSPACE. On a recent trip around the country, we stopped in some lovely cities and visited some child oriented places. It sure was nice to come home to our own Children's Museum. The very reason for this is the PLAYSPACE.

Museums are huge open places with a myriad of fascinating objects, and that is fine for most of us. But tiny kids do not feel the security they need in order to put their minds on exploring the environment. PLAYSPACE, being enclosed, with several even smaller places, allows both the secure environment and the stimulating one to exist together.

My daughter has almost outgrown PLAYSPACE at age five, but because of it, she is completely sure of herself in any other part of the Museum. My son, two and some, has become interested in other exhibits—Bubbles, Raceways, Water Play, etc.—but he still returns to PLAYSPACE for a chance to cool out away from the big kids.

Children's museums in general may have a unique problem in that our visitors may outgrow us. Children's museums and other institutions may be pleasantly surprised to discover, however, that in capturing the loyalty of a young audience, they have acquired lifelong supporters. Certainly the existence of a welcoming PLAYSPACE may contribute to shortening the time lapse before former visiting children and their accompanying adults return

with the next generation of museum-going children in tow.

At the Boston Children's Museum, concern for retaining our members as they grow has had the positive effect of generating new ideas for programs designed to attract and serve older kids even into the teen years. As the foregoing letter stated, PLAYSPACE can provide the secure base from which young families grow into the rest of your museum.

Hypothetical Models

Even after weighing the pros and cons and the pragmatic and altruistic arguments described in the preceding sections, an institution contemplating a parent/child program must still consider how such a program would fit into the organization as a whole. Common to all three models presented here is the concept of PLAYSPACE as both an interactive exhibit and a parent resource center.

Model A: Separate but Equal?

In this model, a segment of the staff is selected to work almost exclusively on this program. The theory behind this solution is that isolating the program allows for better focus of staff energies and greater ease of administration. One Children's Museum administrator has said:

This audience may be better served when its needs are not in conflict with others. You hire or train a staff person who becomes the in-house expert on early childhood development. This person then assumes most of the responsibility for running the project. The beacon light of attention allows for specialized strategies.

Model B: Integration

In an integrated system the program would be just one more exhibit among many. The staffing and operating procedures would be consistent with those already in place. While the program might lose some of its special status, it would gain a more broad-based advocacy. Instead of appearing as a separate preschool center or playground installed in the midst of the site, this model would maintain a relationship in theme and style to the overall museum experience.

Those who advocate for this more "homogenized" solution fear that the isolation of Model A will result in neglect. General services such as repair, cleaning and supplies that are handled on an organization-wide basis may not be delivered uniformly. More importantly, "the power structure will disassociate itself from any separate project."

Model C: A + B = Compromise

Even if everyone in your organization agrees that parenthood is a good thing, the level of advocacy for any program can never be equally enthusiastic. Cultural and other institutions have their own internal balance of powers to maintain. As various departments vie for their fair share of budgets and services, administrators must draw the realistic if sometimes unpopular lines that keep one segment of an audience from "taking over."

Compromise is the key element in making a program like PLAYSPACE fit into an already established framework, and compromise takes a lot of time, talk, tryout and revision. Each model presents its own scheduling and administrative difficulties. An ongoing dialogue over a period of years has brought the Children's Museum to the still tentative solutions of Model C; an "uneasy truce" between isolation and integration.

A Case in Point: The history of the Museum's Interpreter Program as it relates to PLAYSPACE demonstrates the elusiveness of some solutions to basic administrative and programmatic dilemmas. Standard operating procedure for the Museum interpreters (a pool of approximately fifteen to twenty-five people who work directly with the visiting public as museum educators) was to rotate hourly through all exhibits, including PLAYSPACE. The program, however, was constantly striving for the staffing continuity and visitor rapport that could only come with having the smallest number of interpreters on the space for the longest periods of time.

There were scheduling obstacles and policy objections to lengthening or shortening the interpreters' tours of duty on other Museum exhibits to accommodate one exception. In addition, (as may be the case with any exhibit), some interpreters felt more "at home" in PLAYSPACE than others.

In an attempt to be as fair as possible to all parties, we experimented over the years with more permutations than can be listed here. (It should be noted that during this time the Interpreter Program was also undergoing its own internal changes and improvements.) Here are only three examples:

1. Eight interpreters were assigned to PLAYSPACE. Each one worked one of eight weekday shifts. There were two shifts per day, morning and early afternoon. In the afternoons and on weekends, other interpreters rotated hourly. The entire Museum interpreter pool changed every three months.
2. Four interpreters were assigned one morning apiece four days a week with weekends and afternoons subject to hourly rotations. The one weekday reserved for special needs groups used yet another staffing pattern. Once again the interpreters came and went at three month intervals.
3. One interpreter was selected to work five mornings a week and 9 to 5 on Saturdays. Afternoons and Sundays still used the rotation system, but there was a ten month internship.

This last is our present situation and our most consistent staffing pattern to date. It remains to be seen, however, if this plan will survive the next interpreter pool turnover.

"We Never Promised You A Rose Garden"

As may be deduced from the foregoing sections, many problems connected with developing a PLAYSPACE don't have easy answers. We began this chapter by reporting the pros and cons of instituting a program for parents and young children as expressed by a roundtable of Museum administrators. It is important to stress, therefore, that when asked at the close of the discussion, "Would you do it again?", the unanimous answer of the administrators was a resounding, "Yes!"

CHAPTER 8.

Getting Started

Defining your Goals

As with the planning of any new exhibit or program, designing an early childhood project requires a certain amount of institutional self-assessment. The question administrators and designers will be asking should range from the global—"What do we want to do and for whom?" to the very specific—"Which bathrooms should be equipped with changing tables?" The first few planning meetings might resemble "brainstorming" sessions revolving around basic questions such as these:

- What is our "mission" as an institution and how will a PLAYSPACE fit in?
- Who are our visitors now and what are we doing already for the various age levels?
- When families with young children visit, how does their presence disturb our procedures?

... and conversely ...

- What about our institution causes unnecessary stress or discomfort to families with young children?

A women's prison had to consider the special needs of incarcerated mothers and their visiting

children. Both the administration and the inmates were anxious to improve the atmosphere of a large but impersonal public area with changes that would address the following goals:

- To provide a physically comfortable, pleasant, non-institutional appearing environment.
- To design a space flexible enough to accommodate children from infancy to adolescence.
- To provide the sort of toys, games and materials that appeal to different age levels and that strict security rules demand.
- To provide interactive, non-competitive and group activities to ease the tensions of long separations, inmate frictions and arrival and departure time stresses.
- To provide child development information to help incarcerated mothers bridge the gaps of parenting over long intervals of time and distance.

The Milwaukee Public Museum, a natural history museum, came up with the following major purposes:

- To attract families to the museum.

- To provide a place where children can learn about the world through interaction, exploration and discovery.
- To provide an interactive setting for infants, toddlers and parents.
- To provide a place for parents to learn about child development and how to nurture it.

This museum's more specific concerns engendered a list of design requirements over three pages long. Examples of items from this list, together with our own Children's Museum suggestions, will appear throughout this chapter. We hope such checklists will be helpful as guidelines for your own thinking.

Remaining Consistent with Your Institution's Theme

Your institution may be satisfied with, or in fact require, a cozy, attractive PLAYSPACE that is essentially a separate area both physically and aesthetically. If, however, the education of your visitors is part of what you are all about, you may want to consider how elements of your overall theme can be incorporated into this space. In this way, PLAYSPACE can transmit the message to your audience that your institution is aware that even its littlest visitors are learners, too.

A first step in this direction would be to adapt those parts of your established program that are already appropriate to young learners. Aquariums could include built-in, simplified fish tanks or shallow tide pools. Art museums could affix plexiglass covered paintings and drawings to low walls or the sides of the climbing structure. (And what could be more natural in an art museum's PLAYSPACE than activities based on painting with watercolors or sculpting with clay.) These suggestions may seem rather obvious, but we would like to point out that certain carry-over ideas are in fact easier to implement than many people realize.

Boston's Logan International Airport is considering a play area/waiting area of up to one thousand square feet with an airport theme. The

current design calls for modular carpeted seating, an airplane climbing structure with the wings being the bases for two slides, a small play truck and a fuel tank which is also a climbing structure. There is not going to be much quiet contemplation or parent education happening in this space; however, there will be a changeable message board to provide information to parents flying with young children. An undetermined number of wall mounted exhibit cases are also planned for the purpose of displaying aviation and international artifacts.

What must be emphasized is that expectations for these types of objects and activities are necessarily somewhat different from the more direct imparting of information that occurs in more sophisticated exhibits. Young children are not going to grasp large concepts of art or history. Kids enjoy blowing and popping bubbles long before they are ready to question the scientific principles behind the magic.

What can be retained in the PLAYSPACE model, however, are the essentials of any well done exhibit: "the three e's" of exposure, enjoyment and enrichment. Some museum personnel refer to the following exhibit criteria:

- Attraction: Do kids approach or avoid this exhibit?
- Holding Power: If kids are attracted to the exhibit, do they stay awhile and do they do what the designer had in mind?
- Opportunity for Learning: Real learning may be too much to expect in a short time frame. However, is there some evidence that the kids are practicing a mastery of skills or ideas at different levels?

The existence of a PLAYSPACE can help even the youngest visitors develop positive museum-going associations. Children come to play, and over time as they gain mastery over the basic skills of PLAYSPACE, they also become comfortable in your institution and ready to explore further. Maintaining some consistency of theme within your institution's early childhood exhibit may also help broaden the base of internal support for this project

among regular exhibit creators who will be able to contribute their ideas.

Designing the Program

We may have been getting ahead of ourselves in recommending that the planners within your organization meet to enumerate the goals and requirements of the new PLAYSPACE exhibit. Most people have a general idea that kids are shorter, noisier, faster, have shorter attention spans, need more flexibility and require more immediate gratification than the average adult. However, if your professional staff does not encompass persons with more in-depth child development expertise, a most helpful first step would be to form an advisory board.

A good local advisory board might consist of a half dozen or more professionals and interested lay persons in your community who are impassioned about child care issues. Some possible candidates:

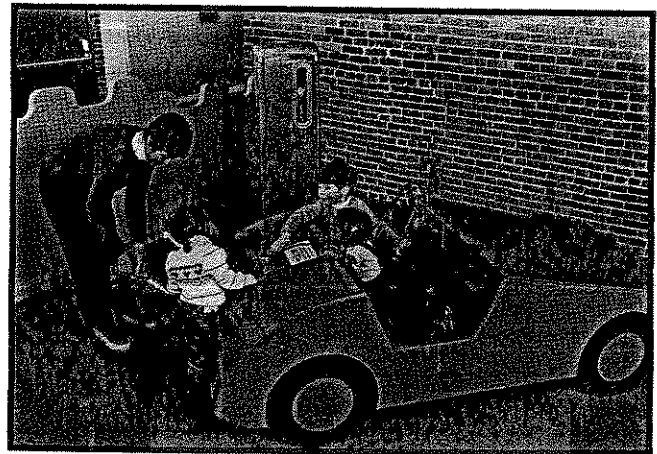
- a child psychologist
- a pediatrician
- a day care provider
- an instructor in early childhood education
- a lawyer
- a preschool or nursery school teacher
- potential users: mothers, fathers, single and teen parents, parents from surrounding neighborhoods
- a social worker

This board will consist of very busy people who may not play that active a part in the project once it is launched, but who will at least continue to be available for advice and support when needed. The remaining complement of in-house advisors might include:

- design and carpentry team

- program developer—this person will say what he or she expects the space to accomplish and “feel like” and the designers will interpret these requests in keeping with the institution’s message and aesthetics
- floor managers
- housekeeping or maintenance representative—include those responsible for daily operation and upkeep. (PLAYSPACE should not be fragile or hard to clean.)
- administrator(s) with final say over design and budget concerns

Finally, we consider our PLAYSPACE to be a drop-in center and exhibit. We are not in the business of providing child care per se. Issues of responsibility, safety, etc., fall under existing institutional operating plans. If you are considering a PLAYSPACE that doubles as a day care center, you should consult a local or state day care licensing bureau.



Parents accompany their children in PLAYSPACE.

Program Requirements

It is nearly impossible to separate program goals and services from the design of the physical space. The precept “form follows function” holds true for PLAYSPACE where the design can also enhance or obstruct the desired effects. The following chart shows some possible correlations between proposed activities and exhibit objects or installations.

Exhibit Pieces

Climbing structures, slides

Shape sorting wall, compartmentalized climbing and playing areas

Simple face and body diagrams, height measuring wall, mirrors

Mobiles, simple switches, pull strings, controls and valves

Lock box, blocks, puzzles

Texture wall, window, record player, bells, colored discs, water play

Arts and crafts table, materials and storage, a simple vehicle with controls, "dress-up" clothes

Seating arrangements, defined spaces, toys for group play

Objectives

Motor skills practice

Experiencing spatial relations

Knowledge of body parts, developing self image

Experiencing cause the effect, action and reaction

Develop manipulative skills

Multi-sensory stimulation

Opportunities for fantasy and dramatic play

Social interaction

Missing from this sampling are the more general considerations of safety and scale—more about those in the next section.

In the relative security of PLAYSPACE both parents and children regain a measure of freedom and independence unusual in a museum visit. Parents have the opportunity to observe their children interacting positively with an exhibit and not just being dragged or wheeled along. The concept of their child as a visitor and a learner may come as a pleasant surprise to many parents. Planning PLAYSPACE objectives with caregivers in mind would include providing functional areas for:

- resting
- conversation with other adults
- browsing through resources
- calming a child or nursing a baby
- dressing and undressing children in inclement weather

- stroller parking and secure storage for coats, lunches, diaper bags, etc.
- comfortable toileting including diapering tables and toilets and wash basins at child height

Your PLAYSPACE should also respond to parents' learning needs. Resources, workshops or group discussions might best be housed in a separate reading and meeting area off the busy exhibit floor. Whether or not your institution is prepared to provide such a space, at the very least your adult-oriented furniture should include bookshelves and/or magazine racks, handout displays, bulletin boards, and comfortable seating.

Designing the Space

Before we become too enmeshed in the "trees" of PLAYSPACE design, let's take a step back to look again at the "forest." Welcoming very young visitors into your institution will mean change; a change in tone and in the physical environment. Children are active learners. They learn through

their senses by playing and doing. A child's normal range of behaviors will be unacceptable in a "don't touch" atmosphere presided over by frowning guards. We hope we have made the point by now that some small piece of almost any exhibit could be made interactive. But regardless of whether or not your institution wishes to accommodate the presence of youngsters outside PLAYSPACE, certain physical design and safety issues must assume priority on the exhibit site and even beyond.

One way to approach the environmental adaptation necessary for young children is to take a look (at least figuratively) at your site from the point of view of being only two or three feet off the ground. Could you reach a water fountain or squeeze between stair railings or poke an electrical outlet? Your new audience will quickly educate your staff to safety issues, but to avoid learning the hard way wherever possible, here are some basic safety precautions.

Design Safety Tips

- Become knowledgeable about fire safety design criteria; e.g., a 4' wide path is usually required for a walkway leading to a fire exit.
- Become knowledgeable about handicapped accessibility issues; e.g., a 3' wide path is the required minimum in most areas to allow wheelchair access.
- Use fire retardant, sound absorbent, unbreakable and washable surfaces wherever possible.
- Carpet floors, steps, ramps and climbing surfaces wherever possible. (Not just a luxury option, carpeting signals parents that it is safe to put their child down.)
- Enclose PLAYSPACE in some way to prevent toddlers from wandering away.
- Separate infant from toddler spaces and enclose infant space with a barrier high enough to keep babies from crawling out and other kids from jumping or tumbling in.
- Slope slides at no more than 26½ degrees and ramps at 14 degrees.
- Vary railings or sidewall heights from 2' to 3', but never lower than 1½'.
- Build a wide base under all climbing, storage or other free standing structures and make sure their separate elements are joined together securely.
- Reinforce joints with a backing piece of lumber.
- Layer any climbing structure into succeeding levels. Keep height changes to no more than 1' between levels.
- If climbing structures bring little hands near the ceiling, cage in light fixtures and sprinkler heads.
- Make peepholes and cut-outs no wider than 3" in diameter. (May be as long as desired.) Bigger porthole openings may look better, but if large enough for little heads not to get stuck, then shoulders might, or a small child might squeeze all the way through.
- Plan sight lines. Allow for visual surveillance of infant and toddler area simultaneously and between parent and child areas.
- Don't use self-closing or spring loaded swinging doors or gates.
- Check out all spaces, especially narrow or high, for adult accessibility (kid grabability).

There is a certain element of "Do as we say," rather than as we have done, in the above list. We are proposing some design features that our own PLAYSPACE models don't necessarily incorporate. We have not always gone back to correct non-critical mistakes such as oversized windows in our Castle. If our carpenters were starting over tomorrow, however, we would make these changes. In the meantime, we monitor our space carefully and try to preserve interest, attractiveness and excitement in the design of our activity pieces without sacrificing safety.

Basic Elements

The PLAYSPACE design can be broken down into three basic elements:

1. Platforms—horizontal activity levels
2. Ramps and Steps—allow movement between levels
3. Seating—used for parent interaction and supervision or as barriers to define and protect spaces.

A slide can be added to any 3' platform in this system. A crawl-through can be added between two platforms. Platforms over 3' high can have activities underneath. (A ceiling height lower than 3' would be too uncomfortable.) It makes sense to utilize such a space as the additional cost is minimal.

Exhibit cases can be added into the walls or floors of most platform units.

Even if you are handing over your package of requirements to an outside design firm, you might want to spend some time laying out your space in a floorplan. A good procedure is to draw an outline of the potential PLAYSPACE area and cut out and place paper representations of the various pieces you intend to include. This may seem simplistic, but it works. Moving paper is a lot easier than moving plywood.

Building Materials

Safety concerns permeate all facets of creating a PLAYSPACE, but there are issues of looks, durability and expense as well. If you are ready to take hammer in hand, here are some more construction recommendations.

Wood and Paint

DO

- use $\frac{3}{4}$ " high quality hardwood plywood—e.g., natural domestic birch
- use vinyl edging on all exposed edges (softens surface and protects against splinters)
- use glue and nails (If done properly the piece will never come apart.)
- use high quality oil base or alkyd paint
- use gloss or semi-gloss paint (They're easier to clean and last longer.)
- use two-part epoxy-type semi-gloss varnish (Varnish is an alternative to paint for revealing good natural grain.)
- choose relaxing colors that appeal to both parents and kids (Muted pinks and blues might be too babyish.)
- call in a lead paint inspector to test painted surfaces in older buildings

DON'T

- use cheaper grades of wood (They do not provide a good paint surface and may splinter.)
- use particle board (It's heavy, hard to work with and tends to chip.)
- use glue or fill in screw holes if you plan to take a piece apart and move it at some future time
- use latex paint (unless quick-drying and lack of odor are priorities)
- use too much natural wood even if the grain is attractive (The resulting look will be sophisticated rather than cozy.)
- use too many bright primary colors that may be overstimulating
- allow paint to flake, crack or peel (Touch up as needed.)

N.B. Paint finishes are specified as gloss, semi-gloss, eggshell and flat in descending order of shine. At the Children's Museum, we use latex eggshell on most walls for ease of repainting. All PLAYSPACE structures are painted with alkyd semi-gloss, except the play car and gas pump, which receive tremendous wear and need gloss alkyd.

Carpet

DO

use industrial grade carpeting with low nap (Plush pile tufts will come out.)

use jute or non-rubber padding for low-traffic density areas, if you must use padding. (Note that padding prevents glueing down of carpet. See below.)

glue down carpet (even though this makes it somewhat harder to stretch and requires more work)

use standard carpet adhesive that allows carpet to be pulled up later for replacement

carpet most horizontal surfaces

look for a high fire safety rating

DON'T

use indoor/outdoor carpeting

use padding in high traffic areas (Padding slowly disintegrates under carpeting and makes carpet harder to clean and less durable.)

use tacks or carpet nailing strips (Nails will work their way up into little hands.)

use contact cement (It's too difficult to rip up and replace.)

use carpeting on vertical surfaces or ceilings (Consult building codes.)

use "foam rubber" or plastic foam composition materials

Glass

DO

use plexiglass instead of real glass ($\frac{3}{8}$ -" or thicker)

use $\frac{1}{4}$ " safety plate glass (or thicker)

replace old, existing ordinary glass windows with tempered insulating glass or specify safety plate glass or cover windows with plexiglass plates

use plexiglass mirrors

keep activity near windows low key

DON'T

use single pane $\frac{1}{8}$ " glass (ever) or $\frac{1}{4}$ " standard glass

use tempered glass (It's stronger than safety plate, but shatters into fragments if it does break. It's also very expensive, has to be ordered in a specific size and takes a long time to get.)

try to clean plexiglass with regular glass cleaning products

Plexi Pros and Cons: The use of plexiglass on PLAYSPACE is a design and safety necessity, not an aesthetic choice. There's nothing like real glass for a clear view. Plexiglass is less durable, scratches easily and is hard to clean. It is also easier to work with. Carpenters can cut it into curved shapes, put screw holes in it and, as in the case of one sunken display case, kids can even step on it. Unfortunately, plexiglass also fogs up, collects dust and warps. Since safety dictates its use, however, you should use the recommended products and procedures to clean it and replace it when necessary.

Plexiglass mirror has similar drawbacks with the addition of poor optical quality resulting in a wavy "funhouse" effect. (The reflective quality is slightly better with $\frac{1}{4}$ " than $\frac{1}{8}$ " thickness, but the difference doesn't justify the added cost.) However, there is really no such thing as real glass safety mirror and very thick mirror is also very expensive.



The Baby Pit, showing the "fun house" effect of the plexi mirror.

We have both real glass and plexiglass mirrors on PLAYSPACE. Two sides of the Baby Pit are covered with plexiglass mirror which provides a slightly softer surface for babies who bump against it as they try to befriend their own reflection. The Measuring Mirror on our PLAYSPACE is made of $\frac{1}{4}$ " real glass mirror. This thick mirror is large, backed with plywood and mounted flat against a brick wall. It most likely would not break even if something were thrown against it. However, if we had to do it over again, we would probably use plexi-mirror.

Graphic Materials

The materials and processes used to make signs, notices, message boards, pictures and drawings may be divided into categories:

Mounting Media: Masonite (hard-board), foamcore and matboard are the primary backing materials for signs. Masonite is more permanent; foamcore and matboard may be cut by hand for quick, expendable signs.

Lettering Media: Alternatives to sign painter's brush and paint are:

- Letraset—sheets of transfer lettering in a multiple of type sizes and styles. Letters and symbols are simply rubbed off onto sign being made.
- Letrasign—durable, stick-on vinyl letters, available in one style and black and white only.
- Pantone—mylar or acetate self-adhesive sheets in many colors for cutting out your own self-stick letters or images.

(These are trade names; other companies make equivalent products.)

If you require hundreds of copies and your original includes black and white or color photographs, you might want to obtain estimates from professional printers. Where a less than perfect photo image will suffice, photocopying is less expensive. Silk screening is also costly, but the process results in a high contrast image with can be reproduced on a range of materials including cloth.

For lettering-only signs that need to change daily or weekly, but should still fit in with the overall aesthetic scheme of the space, you may want to use a system we have dubbed "Pioneer Graphics." The Museum has printed multiple copies of simple and inexpensive single-format sign blanks. These blanks may be hand-lettered and photo-copied for do-it-yourself sign making.

Collection Objects

The Castle climbing structure on our space contains several built-in plywood and plexiglass

exhibit cases. (One case, for example, contains a stuffed bird, nest and eggs set in sand and measures approximately 8" in width by 27" in length and 11" in depth.) These display cases are not physically connected to the Castle in any way. The boxes are placed behind the walls with a slight gap of 1/4" all around and their bases rest on the floor. This is done to cut down on the potentially harmful vibration which accompanies constant active use. The plexi glazing is not part of the case, but is recessed into the adjoining structure. The wall cases have 1/4" plexi glazing and the floor case has 1/2" plexi to withstand the load of children walking or jumping on it.

Each display case also has its own fluorescent light and is ventilated with a fan and air holes to keep heat from damaging the objects. (No wiring is attached to the castle and the light and fan are plugged into outlets in the floor hidden beneath the structure.) This sort of arrangement has worked well for us, but such cases would not protect delicate artifacts. In addition, each case costs approximately \$300 to \$400 to build. Therefore, choose carefully what will be displayed in this manner.

Building the Space

The "Bare Bones" PLAYSPACE

If your institution is constrained by a lack of space or money there are a few essential components for a pared down version of PLAYSPACE. Depending on your priorities or what is lacking in your present environment, you won't want to do without a quiet corner and/or one activity piece.

In the quiet corner, go for comfort. Locate this carpeted respite and reading area out of the flow of traffic and near water fountains and bathrooms. Indicate by comfortable modular seating in cozy, circular arrangements (with a sprinkling of pillows and storybooks) that this area offers a change of pace—a quiet nook where the weary can take time out to regroup.

The modular carpet over plywood seating follows a standard design measurement of 16" up from the floor with a 16" deep seat and a 16" high back. One of these pieces, approximately four feet in length could cost in the neighborhood of \$575. A one piece corner in the same style would cost about \$900, plus an additional \$400 for a rounded

corner piece. Of course you could cut corners with less expensive carpeting or second-hand furniture, but if your area is going to see heavy use, this is not advisable.

This respite area might also include a four-sided, two-level, child's loft structure for resting and quiet play. An 8' x 4' box with four stair steps up to the second, railed level could cost in the range of \$2000 to \$3200. One way to save money would be to position this area in the corner of a room and build up only two sides.

The range of prices for the above built pieces reflects the difference between a plain painted box-like structure and one that has pleasant curves and cut-outs for viewing, colorful graphics and "loungable" carpets. Design and construction time rather than materials cause the expense to mount up. Your design criteria expressing purposes together with your budget will be the basis for a contract if you are going to be working with an outside design firm. If your organization needs and can locate a source of donated labor, this would result in the greatest savings.

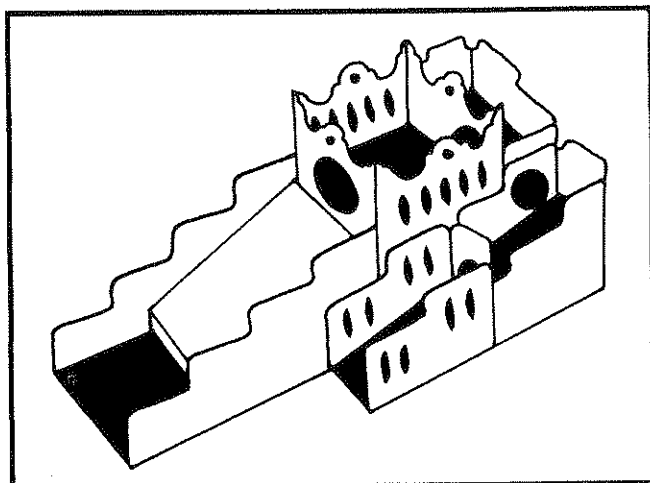
If your institution has sufficient space and the funds to put some "meat" on your PLAYSPACE's "bones," an essential activity piece would be a climbing structure with a slide component. (This piece, which we call the Castle, works best if you have the space to be able to stand back and look at it, but even in a quiet corner multi-leveled structures add interest and are adaptable to multi-purposes as well.) The Castle and slide require height and each added level means added expense.

Let's take a very basic PLAYSPACE climbing structure as might be built by a modest site and see what the cost for labor and materials would be. (The following measurements indicate height.)

| | |
|--------------------|--------|
| 36" Tower | \$1200 |
| 0-12" Ramp | 700 |
| 12"-24" Ramp | 900 |
| 24"-36" Ramp | 900 |
| Slide | 1100 |
| TOTAL | \$4800 |

In our Museum, this \$4800 would represent only about thirty-five percent of the total costs. The

complete cost includes other factors such as program development, design and installation.



A "bare bones" PLAYSPACE (previous chart).

The Museum's PLAYSPACE

Now let's look at the cost of building our Museum's PLAYSPACE. Since it has evolved over many years and had so many modifications, an accurate cost is difficult to tally. If we break the space down into modular elements, however, we can obtain a fair estimate.

Castle:

| | |
|-----------------------|--------|
| Slide | \$1100 |
| 36" Tower | 1200 |
| 48" Tower | 1200 |
| (3) 12" Towers | 3000 |
| 24" Tower | 1200 |
| 0-12" Step Unit | 700 |
| 0-12" Ramp | 700 |
| TOTAL | \$9100 |

Quiet Corner:

| | |
|------------------------|--------|
| 4' x 8' Platform | \$2200 |
| Step Unit | 1000 |
| TOTAL | \$3200 |

Toddler Area:

| | |
|----------------------------------------|--------|
| 2 Corner Seating Units @ \$900 | \$1800 |
| 3 Straight Seating Units @ \$575 | 1725 |
| TOTAL | \$3525 |

Additional Seating:

| | |
|----------------------------------------|--------|
| 7 Corner Seating Units @ \$900 | \$6300 |
| 4 Straight Seating Units @ \$575 | 2300 |
| TOTAL | \$8600 |

Total for construction of elements \$24,425

The complete cost for creating our PLAYSPACE:

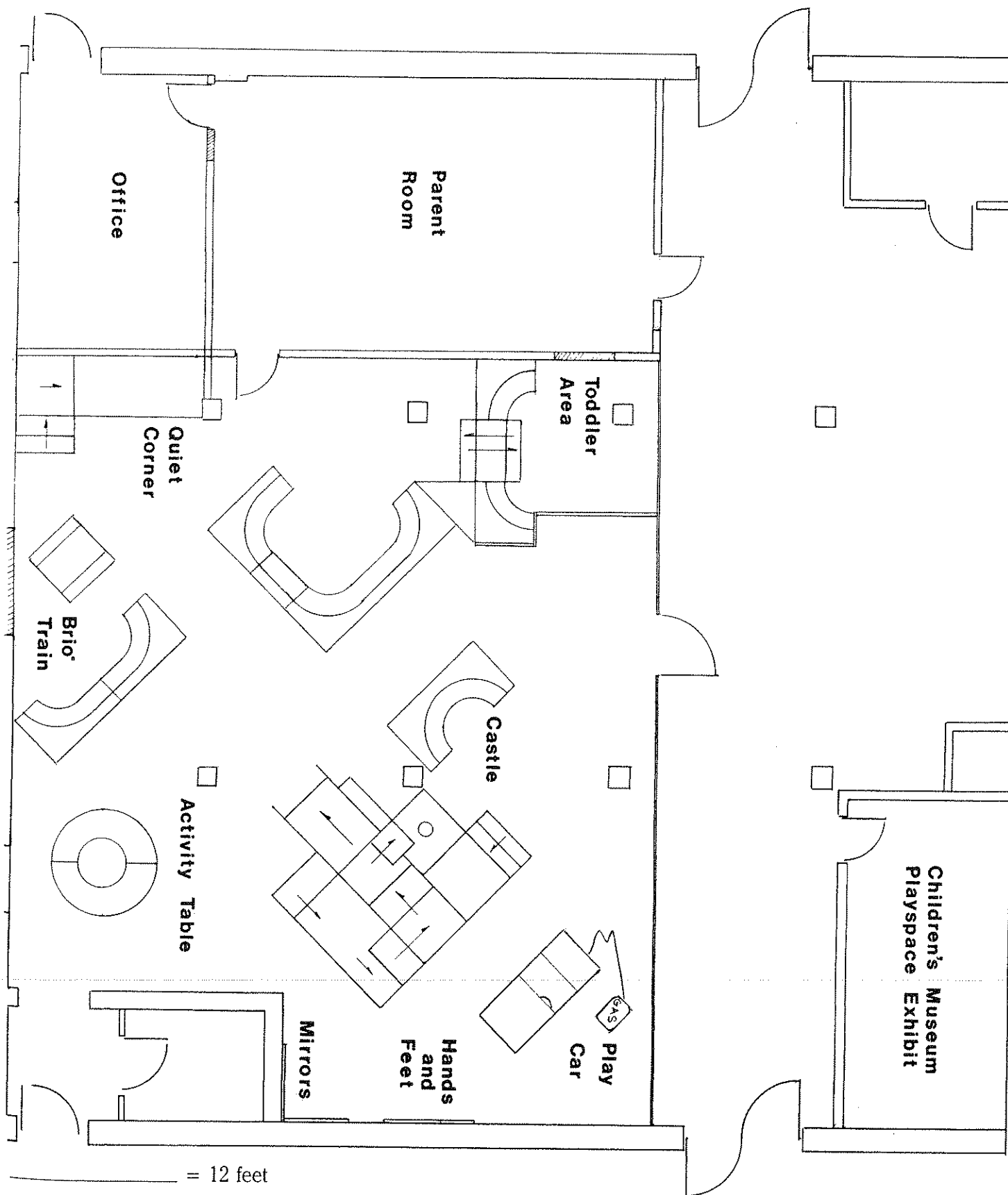
| | |
|----------------------------------|----------------|
| Program Development | \$17,446 (25%) |
| Design of Space and Elements ... | 6,979 (10%) |
| Design and Production | |
| Management | 6,979 (10%) |
| Space Modification | 6,979 (10%) |
| Construction of Elements | 24,425 (35%) |
| Installation of Elements | 6,979 (10%) |
| TOTAL | \$69,787 |

To simplify this exercise, we omitted the office and Parent Room and exhibit pieces, such as the blue car and gas pump, hands and feet and the mirror measuring wall. So, to construct a two thousand square foot PLAYSPACE like ours (single color, no exhibit cases) would require an investment of \$69,787. To duplicate *exactly* what we have could exceed \$100,000. *And* these figures do not account for the trial and error costs over the past fifteen years.

Funding

Each institution that decides to develop a PLAYSPACE-type exhibit and program will be dealing with its own specific environment, goals and financial circumstances. However, so many educators and administrators have asked us to provide a rough estimate of the costs involved in operating a PLAYSPACE on the scale of the Children's Museum model, that we are including the following information.

Current PLAYSPACE Floorplan



Projected Costs to Operate the PLAYSPACE Program

| | |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Personnel and Benefits | \$34,500 |
| Consultants | 500 |
| Stipends (work-study, free memberships) | 1,500 |
| Interpreter Wages | 7,000 |
| Books for Parent Resource Room | 300 |
| Materials and Supplies | 2,000 |
| Duplicating | 500 |
| Printing | 500 |
| Other | 1,000 |
| TOTAL | \$46,800 |

(The Museum contributes administrative, secretarial, public relations, fundraising and space operation costs.)

The above figures are based on a 2770 square foot space operating six days a week (seven during school vacations) within an institution serving approximately 365,000 visitors per year.

Potential Sources of Income

We've been asked to estimate the income to the Museum generated by families with young children. Families visiting the Museum, including PLAYSPACE, either pay admission, buy a membership or come on Friday evenings when the Museum is free of charge. Sometimes their admission is sponsored if they are a part of a school or community group visit.

We have no way of tracking visitors to specific exhibit areas, therefore we do not know how much admissions income can be directly attributed to PLAYSPACE. We do know that there are many regular users of PLAYSPACE, some coming weekly, many coming once a month. Repeat visitors usually buy a membership. We have included here our total admissions and income amounts and you will have to draw your own conclusions.

Admissions: We do have statistics for the period Dec. 15, 1983-Jan. 15, 1984. During this period 63% of the children visiting were 5 or under. A survey on one Sunday in April, 1984 counted all children 0-16 by age. This time, 55% were 5 years old or younger.

Parents with young children are one of the few non-school group audiences able to use the

Museum weekday mornings. We estimate that 200 parents and preschoolers visit us daily in this time slot.

Total Children's Museum admissions income for FY'84 is projected at \$640,000, based on 365,000 visitors.

Memberships: Membership income has increased over the past three years from \$90,000 to \$150,000. Some possible contributing factors are a new economy membership program, an expanded library membership program and many families who want to come to the Museum often. A survey in 1981 indicated that 53% of the members had children 5 years old and under.

Fees: This includes income from university courses, workshops and conferences. Parent and child workshops are always over-subscribed. With limited space and staff, we earn approximately \$2,000 per year in fees. The Museum staff has also received funds from local universities to conduct early childhood courses. These range from \$800 to \$1,500 per semester depending on the university. An annual conference could raise an additional \$2,000.

Consultations: The Museum staff responds to requests from other organizations for consultations regarding the PLAYSPACE program. We anticipate ten to twenty days per year producing income of \$1,000 to \$2,000.

Grants: Primary support for the Early Childhood Project has come from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Over the past ten years the program has received support from the Massachusetts Department of Education, the Harris Foundation, the Bureau of Education of the Handicapped and the National Endowment for the Arts. Program grants range from \$5,000 to \$100,000 per year.

Royalties/Sales: From books and publications we project an average income of \$1,000 per year.

Spreading the Word

Your organization may be fortunate in having a public relations department that will help you get the word out about your new PLAYSPACE program. However, even if your publicity covers your present membership and the usual press and media outlets you may not reach the people you most want to contact. Try posting information about your new space in some non-traditional advertising markets:

- pediatricians' offices
- supermarkets
- nursery schools
- laundromats
- libraries
- churches
- health clinics
- thrift shops
- bulletin boards of colleges with early childhood programs

Create a simple mimeographed newsletter or make it as slick as you can afford, and distribute it in schools, churches, libraries and similar places. Provide a student teaching position or work-study placement and your program will become known by educators who are in a position to advise and train large numbers of people who come in contact with parents and children daily.

Long range publicity projects might involve compiling your own mailing list and developing a slide presentation to show when speaking to local organizations. Last, but not least, never underestimate the power of word of mouth. Tell everybody!

CHAPTER 9.

In Conclusion

From our involvement with PLAYSPACE we have learned that:

- Parents—young, older, poor, professional—need support in their task and do not find it readily available in many communities.
- PLAYSPACE provides that needed support as well as education and fun. It helps relieve the stress and isolation which often accompany parenting.
- A non-threatening environment, such as a museum or shopping mall, reaches people who might never go to parenting classes or counselors, but a consistently determined effort must be made to reach out to people who rarely go to museums.
- PLAYSPACE enriches the host museum as well as its audience by engendering greater sensitivity to the needs of visitors of all ages.
- Observing beginning learners fosters a closer look at interactive learning in general and the development of innovative ways to use and display collections for the benefit of all visitors.

We look forward to the future in which we plan to focus on:

- More exhibits about the stages of child development and educational materials.
- Exhibits on multicultural child-rearing using objects from the Museum's Collections.
- Expanded programs for teen parents and families with special needs.

We believe that:

- PLAYSPACES located in other public places, such as libraries, airports or shopping malls, could provide even more widespread family support.
- PLAYSPACE should be replicated across the country and around the world.

We hope that this book will help in that effort.

Glossary

Collections: The Museum accessions, stores and protects about 20,000 natural history specimens and 40,000 artifacts representing people and cultures from around the world, including dolls, toys, games and ephemera of American culture from the past one hundred years.

developer: Museum term for a subject matter specialist in a program area, such as East Asian Studies or Early Childhood. Developers are responsible for the curatorial needs of their specific collections, planning exhibits and kits, writing curriculum materials and books, training interpreters and teachers and teaching workshops and courses.

Early Childhood: One of six comprehensive programs of the Boston Children's Museum, focusing on children five years old and under and their parents and caregivers.

Early Childhood Project: The Children's Museum project funded by the Carnegie Corporation from 1980 to 1984. The project developed environments, programs and material within the Museum to promote a positive climate for parents and children to share, support and learn from one another, and plans to facilitate replicating these models in other natural settings.

Exhibit Center: The division of the Museum housing more than fifteen participatory exhibits designed primarily for children from preschool through early teens. Educational program and exhibit themes include Americana, Northeast Native Americans, Japan, Science, Dolls and Toys and Games, Living Things, Special Needs, Work and Early Childhood.

floor manager: One of several persons who insure the efficient daily operation of the Exhibit Center. Particularly responsible for orientation, scheduling and supervision of floor staff, and managing systems affecting the quality of the public visit, such as opening and closing, staff coverage, safety, complaints and emergencies. Also coordinates school group visits and special events.

interpreter: Participant in the Museum's entry level training program; high school graduate, college student or person in career transition who interacts with the visiting public. Interpreters monitor the use of equipment, conduct activities on the floor and are easily identifiable by their bright orange aprons.

Kits: Boxes full of learning materials created by the Museum staff that may be rented from the Kit Rental Department. Kits cover nearly one hundred subjects based on the Museum's themes. Content varies from simple collections of objects and pic-

tures to comprehensive curriculum units with structured lesson plans.

Museum Wharf: The location of the Children's Museum in the Fort Point Channel waterfront area of downtown Boston.

natural settings: Places families frequent in the course of everyday living; shopping centers, museums, clinics and laundromats. Indoor gathering places for parents and young children that present potential forums for the kind of informal exchange that may occur in neighborhood parks.

Recycle: A store within the Children's Museum full of barrels of inexpensive industrial by-products, such as wood, foam, paper and plastic parts. RECYCLE products provide raw materials for arts, crafts and science projects for schools and families.

Resource Center: The division of the Museum which serves parents, teachers, community workers, students and members by lending books, renting objects and kits, conducting workshops and courses, coordinating community outreach programs and displaying educational materials in subject area studies—all related to the Museum's themes.

Saturday Seminar: One of a series of day-long teacher training workshops consisting of discussions, demonstrations and activities based on themes such as "Creative Experiences for Young Children."

Appendices

Toys

Here is a list of some toys that have worked well for us because of their proven durability and popularity. In choosing toys, keep in mind a balance of items for individual and group play, for different age ranges and for quiet and active play.

- Mattel shopping cart (18 mos. and up)
- Brio train and track set (18 mos. and up and parents)
- Fisher Price garage or farm (18 mos. and up and parents)
- Riding toys—wooden trike, tractor and wagon (18 mos.-4 yrs.)
- Wooden dollhouse and furniture (good for role playing for boys and girls of all ages including parents)
- Large doll and/or teddy bear (all ages)
- Tea set and/or cooking set—sturdy plastic or metal (1-4 yrs.)
- Lock box (2-4 yrs.)
- Cardboard blocks and/or sealed milk cartons (1-3 yrs.)
- Simplex wooden handle puzzles or Lauri puzzles (1-5 yrs.)
- Duplo and/or Lego—large size pieces (18 mos.-5 yrs. and parents)
- Mirror(s)—plexiglass (birth to 18 mos.)
- Colored discs—large plastic translucent (18 mos. and up or younger with parents)
- Quilt and pillows (for resting infants, birth to 1 yr.)

Reading and Resources

A brief bibliography for additional information or stocking your parent resource library.

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Associated Grantmakers. 94 Washington
Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02109.

Corporate Foundation Profiles. 3rd edition, The
Foundation Center. 888 Seventh Avenue,
New York, New York 10106.

Foundation Directory. 9th edition, The Foundation
Center. 888 Seventh Avenue, New York,
New York 10106.

State Attorney General's Office:
All foundations and corporations must file forms
with the Attorney General's office in each state. In
some states, the Attorney General's office also
publishes directories of Foundations within the
state.

Organizations

Action for Children's Television
46 Austin Street
Newtonville, MA 02160
(617) 527-7870

Administration for Children, Youth and Families
c/o U.S. Department of Health and Human
Services
Washington, D. C. 20201
(202) 755-7762

American Association of Elementary-
Kindergarten-Nursery Educators
NEA Center
1201 Sixteenth Street, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20036
(202) 833-4390

American Foundation for Maternal and
Child Health
30 Beekman Place
New York, New York 10022
(212) 759-5510

American Montessori Society
150 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10011
(212) 924-3209

Association for Childhood Education International
3615 Wisconsin Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20016
(202) 363-6963

Bananas Child Care Information Service
6501 Telegraph
Oakland, CA 94609
(415) 658-7101

Black Child Development Institute
1028 Connecticut Avenue, N. W.,
Suite 514
Washington, D. C. 20036
(202) 659-4010

Child Welfare League of America
67 Irving Place
New York, New York 10003
(212) 254-7410

Children's Defense Fund
1520 New Hampshire Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20036
(202) 483-1470

Education Development Center
55 Chapel Street
Newton, MA 02160
(617) 969-7100

Erikson Institute for Advanced Study in Child
Development
233 N. Michigan Avenue
Suite 2200
Chicago, Illinois 60601
(312) 565-2970

March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation
1275 Mamaroneck Avenue
White Plains, New York 10605
(914) 428-7100

National Association for the Education of Young
Children
1834 Connecticut Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20009
(202) 232-8777

National Foundation for Gifted and Creative
Children
395 Diamond Hill Road
Warwick, RI 02886
(401) 942-2253

National Institute of Child Health and Human
Development
Public Health Service
National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, MD 20014
(202) 496-4000

Parents Without Partners
7910 Woodmont Avenue
Washington, D. C. 20014
(202) 654-8850

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Washington, D. C. 20201
(202) 245-7204

Acknowledgements

A great many people have contributed to the Early Childhood Project in a wide variety of ways. First of all, we would like to thank the Carnegie Corporation, whose generous financial support enabled us to continue to try out our ideas and programs for parent support and education. We are grateful to those at the Museum who enriched the project with their special talents, and to the entire Children's Museum staff for welcoming our youngest visitors and their parents and caregivers into the Museum family. We thank our local and national advisory boards for sharing their ideas and expertise in the fields of child development and parent education. Finally, our most sincere thanks go to the hundreds of parents and children with whom we have worked and played during the past years, in their roles as visitors and PLAYSPACE parent volunteers. Their interest and desire to share and to learn about child development and child rearing, gives our work meaning and purpose.

END