

2008 UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING AWARD

Presented by VSA arts and Association of Children's Museums

The 2008 *Universal Design for Learning Award* identifies model programs in children's museums that demonstrate learning standards for inclusive practice. Following are summaries from the three children's museum award recipients.

Great Explorations, The Children's Museum
St. Petersburg, FL

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Start with the Arts preschool is a full day, eclectic, educational experience for 52 children ages 2- 5, of all abilities, which opened in early 2007— reaching full enrollment within nine months. More than 50 percent of the students receive scholarships. A former national preschool director, currently completing her Ph.D., directs the program. The Creative Curriculum emphasizes social competence. All teachers, program directors and the museum CEO completed VSA arts' Start with the Arts workshops. Start with the Arts incorporates individualized, flexible methods for each child and teacher to support each other while participating in the achievement of the individualized learning goals for each child, which may include learning American Sign Language, English, French, Spanish, a musical instrument, creating and displaying an art exhibit or presenting a math and science project. Overall, the preschool boasts a 1:7 ratio of teachers to children, exceeding standards recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, whose accreditation process the museum has begun. The Reggio Emilia and Multiple Intelligence Approaches have fostered multiple points of view and learning styles regarding children's needs, interests and abilities from parents, teachers and children. The museum invested in Universal Design furniture and materials to support a fully inclusive environment. Collaboration with a local botanical garden provides the children with outdoor, accessible, free play space and complements the museum's indoor exhibit play experiences.

Minnesota Children's Museum
St. Paul, MN

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In fall 2006, the Accessible Play Initiative began when VSA Arts, Pacer Center, Courage Center, Gillette Children's Specialty HealthCare and ARC Greater Twin Cities, which serve the disability community, joined with the Minnesota Children's Museum to form an Accessible Play Initiative. In 2007, the Initiative focused on how to improve the museum experience for families with disabilities. While hosting the "access/ABILITY" exhibit, the museum implemented many of the Initiative's strategies including developing new training component for staff focused on disability awareness; highlighting the work of community partners (VSA Arts artists performances, Pacer Center puppet show); hosting VSA Arts youth artists exhibit; providing free Family Nights for Initiative families and; prototyping Access Mondays with accessible activities. In 2008, the Initiative is actively assisting the museum to expand accessibility by implementing Play for All Fridays, expanding VSA Arts programs and enhancing guest experiences. This will include year-round programming designed for families with disabilities, increasing VSA Arts programming during the summer months and improving communication with the disability community. In accordance with the museum's strategic plan, a major goal is to be inclusive within the museum at every level.

The museum's staff, under the direction of the Department of Experience Development and Evaluation, evaluates programs and exhibits to ensure that they provide opportunities for all children to engage in problem solving, cognitive and artistic experiences. Part of this process includes using a matrix that incorporates accessibility criteria in the development, design and evaluation of exhibits and programs. In addition to program evaluation, the museum assesses the delivery of the programs to ensure that

inclusive practices are followed so all children have opportunities for cognitive and artistic skill development. The museum documents children's creations, inventions and experiences in exhibits and programs to make their learning visible.

Grand Rapids Children's Museum
Grand Rapids, MI

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Since its inception Grand Rapids Children's Museum has articulated a commitment to being an inclusive organization. This commitment of inclusion impacts all programming decisions and was a key factor in creating Connor's Friends: An Evening for Children with Autism. During Connor's Friends, a free program, the museum is transformed from a 1,800 square foot open space structure to one of several smaller spaces utilizing large fabric panels hung from the ceiling. The attendance for the event is limited to 200 people and includes children with autism and their siblings, parents and/or grandparents. Excessive stimulation upon entering the museum is minimized by providing valet parking to families and utilizing volunteers to hang up coats and check in families upon arrival. The atmosphere of the museum transitions with the use of pup-tents to create small, comfort spaces for children; fluorescent lighting is replaced with flood lights to create a calming space; and Native American drumming music is softly piped throughout the museum. Body steamrollers are placed throughout the museum to provide children with a fun way to create needed equal body pressure for a sense of calm. Museum exhibits include tactile materials such as rice and Play Doh. Volunteers (special education or nursing students recruited from area universities) are stationed throughout, ensuring that children paired with a knowledgeable play mentors.

A program committee comprised of museum staff, Autism Society of Kent County members, rehabilitation therapists, parents and grandparents of children with autism was created to share resources, research solutions, design activities and implement Connor's Friends evenings. In addition, feedback from participating families is collected for review at all events. For example, from this year's participant survey the museum received a comment suggesting a large motor skill activity needed more room for the children to participate. Another survey suggested more multiple activities so children would not have to share or wait. The committee reviews and integrates comments and recommendations into the planning for future events and programs.