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## Why So Many Floor Staff?

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Like children's museums around the world, DuPage Children's Museum (DCM) strives for hands-on, open-ended learning opportunities. What sets us apart is that we do so with a firm grounding in constructivist philosophy: children are most successful when adults support them in constructing their own understanding. To that end, we have one of the nation's highest ratios of staff to visitors.

To each exhibit area DCM assigns between one and three facilitators, supported by seven to twelve paid staff and two to fifteen volunteers depending upon the time of day and the day of the week. To make this possible, we have over fifty part- and full-time paid staff and more than 200 volunteer facilitators from age twelve to eighty.

Play facilitators help children and adults expand their learning experience in the museum. Facilitators use methods that include observation, imitation, modeling, offering feedback, providing alternatives and setting challenges. Sometimes they assist a child to make the next leap in understanding how something works; sometimes they encourage collaborative play by modeling use and investigation of exhibits.

How do we know that the facilitators make a difference? We discuss the supportive role adults have played in children's educational investigations during our staff training sessions, and we encourage staff to record what we call Mission Moments. Mission Moments are those occasions during a museum visit which demonstrate constructivist play in action with the aid of a supportive adult or play facilitator. One example:

*"I was working at the gear table in "Make It Move" when a girl about six years old and her mother sat down. I invited the daughter to try the handle. She discovered the moving gears. I asked if she wanted to add some more gears. She did. The mom was great about letting her daughter figure out how to make the gears move and she asked the right questions to help her daughter understand that the gears needed to touch to work. As the girl added more gears, her mother commented, "You're really impressing me!"*

*At one point, the mother mentioned that cars work using gears, so I showed the daughter how the gear table uses plastic gears which could be arranged to even work at a ninety-degree angle. She wanted to try that. After some experimentation, again with some good guiding questions from mom, the girl succeeded. We all cheered and the mother commented with a bit of wonder in her voice, "And they say girls can't think mechanically." It was a moment of realization for mother and daughter alike."*

This high-level facilitation staffing model does not come easily or without cost. When I came to DCM almost six years ago, the museum had just moved into its new building. Staff had quadrupled almost overnight. Everyone was playing catch up. Where there had been ten there were now more than fifty paid facilitators with at least fourteen paid staff on the museum floor at all times. There was a strict

schedule with little flexibility; no one was ever available to cover shifts if people needed a day off. A different department handled all the training with little input from me on what they were training the facilitation staff to do. And to top it off, volunteers kept showing up on the floor—we didn't know what to do with them and they didn't seem to realize we were their supervisors. What had worked well with a small staff needed some serious tweaking if it was going to work with a large staff. But we felt the visitor outcomes were important enough that we were willing to make the effort.

After several years of experimentation, we have reorganized the staff, worked out a new training model and reporting structure, and established a culture that puts our visitors first. Some of the changes in staff structure include realigning daily schedules with visitor traffic patterns; personalizing scheduled shifts for better flexibility and coverage; consolidating Visitor Service, Museum Floor and Volunteers into the same department to improve communication; creating several Play Coordinator positions to enable experienced staff to train new facilitators and to act as a bridge between managers and staff; and matching volunteers to more appropriate positions to make better use of training time for short-term and junior volunteers.

A new training program was developed by an on-staff early childhood specialist and it was team-taught with a Play Coordinator. Staff and volunteers spend time observing facilitators in action before facilitating on their own to help new staff understand job expectations. All new facilitators are paired with experienced staff before going solo. Finally, ongoing training is offered on special interest topics, from children with autism spectrum disorder to multiculturalism.

Team building is essential to the ongoing support and professionalism of these key staff people. During September shutdown, cross-departmental groups visit area museums to observe and reflect on how we serve our visitors while encouraging staff who don't work together every day to get to know one another. Exhibit development teams are cross-departmental and include one Play Facilitator to represent the visitor experience from an operational perspective (Can we clean it? Will it break? What will happen when someone climbs on it?) Four all museums staff meetings per year along with several social events keep floor staff involved and recognized. This year the Board held a thank-you dinner for the staff at a comedy club.

The staffing model evolves as we meet new challenges each year. We continue to seek ways to improve service for visitors from the time they enter the parking lot until the time they have to convince their tired, crying children that the museum really is closing and they have to go home (*We give them stickers*). Frontline museum staff have to be the greatest problem-solvers on the face of the earth! Our Mission Moments continue to bear this out:

*“In “Water,” a toddler was splashing water out of the table. Rather than saying anything, I modeled pouring water into a water wheel. It took a few minutes, but he started imitating me and even took it further with a funnel. He wasn't splashing anymore! His mom, who had been frustrated, said “Thanks.” We talked about what I did and she said she'd like to try that at home.”*

This creative facilitator found a way to redirect a child's inappropriate activity, thereby creating an opportunity for the boy to become more focused and engaged, and for the parent to see a way to redirect without reprimanding. In this way, the museum becomes a community center to support families through modeling and facilitation. That is what facilitation at children's museums is all about: focusing and engaging children and their supportive adults in developmental play.