

CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS AND THE ROLE OF PLAY

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Some people talk about play as if it were a relief from serious learning or even worse: a waste of time. But for children, play is exceedingly serious...and important! In fact, play is a way for children to learn who they are, how the world works, solve problems, and to express feelings. Yes, play is the real work of childhood, and for young people today, many children's museums offer play experiences that other settings are not able to give them.

In a children's museum art studio, young children can draw or create from a wide variety of materials. They don't need to try to make something that looks exactly like something they see in the world. Drawing gives them a way to express their own feelings and thoughts. It's not important that they "get it right." It's important that they do it their own way. Children can try on costumes... and different "roles," which give them safe ways of exploring and acting out their concerns and deeper inner needs.

When children build and make things, they can feel more in control not only of the outside world but their inner selves as well. So much of children's lives (when they sleep, what they eat, etc.) are naturally controlled by adults. When they play with blocks, they are making decisions about the form that the blocks will take, and what, if anything, their "building" represents. They're creating from their own ideas! Besides that, when children have some things they're in charge of, they're more likely to feel comfortable about letting adults be in charge of other things in their lives.

Children's museums are often filled with climbers and other things, which challenge children's physical abilities. Even by watching a toddler "toddling," you can see how much energy -- and fascination -- goes into being able to walk. Preschoolers work on learning how to move through their world, get around, hop or skip or run fast. They need to develop confidence in their growing bodies and what they can do.

Many children's museums include a place for water-play. Children love the feel of water. It is an activity that does not ask for right answers, just to be enjoyed. Peek-a-boo boxes, rice tables, colorful shapes and shadows also encourage children to appreciate and understand their world.

What nourishes our imagination? Probably more than anything else, loving adults who encourage children's own choices of imaginative play. Parents in children's museums are often found playing alongside their children. Sometimes we adults forget that childhood isn't just something we "get through." It's a big journey, and one that we all take. Hopefully, we adults will never forget how much we have "learned" from early childhood on about others and ourselves.