Outstanding Practice in Children’s Museums Award

What Is a Children’s Museum?
A children’s museum is defined as an institution committed to serving the needs and interests of children by providing exhibits and programs that stimulate curiosity and motivate learning. Children’s museums are organized as permanent not-for-profit educational and cultural institutions with professional staff, which utilize objects and are open to the public on some regular schedule.

There are more than 300 children’s museums in the world serving millions of families, but every institution is unique. Children’s museums are known for being joyful spaces for learning and play, and much more than just places to visit. In fact, every children’s museum – regardless of its size – functions across four key dimensions: museum experiences, community resources, educational laboratories, and advocates for children.

In other words, as museum experiences (featuring designed spaces such as exhibits) and educational laboratories (via programming), children’s museums act as community resources and advocates for children.

Every children’s museum implements these roles differently. They may be at the forefront of critical dialogues around children and families in their communities, leading coalitions and changing policy and practice. They may also play supporting roles, leveraging their physical locations and relationships to advance partners’ efforts.

The Award
The Outstanding Practice in Children’s Museums Award recognizes an exceptional accomplishment by a children’s museum in work across all departments that is also recognized as an outstanding practice for the field.

Considering the four dimensions of a children’s museum described below, discuss how your museum has developed and/or implemented a successful experience, program, or business practice that aligns with one of the four award categories: museum experiences, community resources, educational laboratories, and advocates for children. In addition to aligning with one of the four award categories, also discuss how the work would be recognized as an outstanding practice for the field.
Four Award Categories:

1. **Museum Experiences**
   This category looks at how the built environment enables an engaging, child-centered experience for visitors. Examples of eligible work: exhibit design, museum design/renovation.
   Museum Experiences can be described as:
   - Designing child-centered learning spaces to encourage positive adult-child interactions.
   - Designing exhibits and/or exhibit content to address community needs.
   - Designing audience focused spaces/experiences.
   - Staff expertise in using objects and exhibits to communicate their meaning to visitors.

2. **Community Resources**
   This category explores the many ways children’s museums serve their community—as a community anchor (third space), as a community partner, and economic contributor. Examples of eligible work: community engagement, community partnerships, volunteers, committees, boards, communication, marketing.
   Community Resources can be described as:
   - Children’s museums building lifelong learning and museum-going habits.
   - Children’s museums creating more child-friendly communities.
   - Children’s museums as anchor institutions for community revitalization efforts.
   - Marketing campaigns and communication strategies designed to convey how a children’s museum serves their community.

3. **Educational Laboratories**
   This category focuses on the innovative approaches to informal learning and early childhood development best practices. Examples of eligible work: programming, exhibits, educational outreach, research and evaluation.
   Educational Laboratories can be described as:
   - Children’s museums acting as incubators and innovators, testing and developing child-centered and play-based pedagogies for engaging children in learning.
   - Staff expertise in learning theories, child development, and pedagogy to develop impactful and cutting-edge programs and experiences for their visitors.
   - Research and assessment practices documenting the impact and value of programs, exhibits, and services and contribute new knowledge to educational and museum literature.

4. **Advocates for Children**
   This category focuses children’s museums as engaged community organizations that are leaders in responding to changes in their community’s demographics and needs. Examples of eligible work: community outreach, diversity and inclusion, universal access, advocacy.
   Advocates for Children can be described as:
   - Responding to the current needs of the children and families in their communities, from health to academics to social issues, as seen in their exhibits, outreach, and programming.
   - Cultivating deep and wide-ranging relationships with partners from all sectors to best serve all children and families in their communities, and address critical social issues.
   - Sharing a commitment to equity and inclusion, with subsidized attendance programs, programs for children and families with special needs, multicultural programming, and more.
Eligibility Criteria:
All open, ACM member museums in good standing (current on dues) are eligible to apply for the Outstanding Practice in Children's Museums Award. Creative experience, programs, or business practices submitted should have been developed and/or implemented at least one full year outside of pilot period and no more than three years prior to submission.

Application Process:
To apply for the Outstanding Practice in Children’s Museums Award, museums should submit the following materials:

- Application form addressing three topics:
  - Why the submitted work is a successful practice for your museum.
  - Why the submitted work is an outstanding practice for the field.
  - How this work aligns with one of the four dimensions described above.
- Include supplementary materials that further illustrate the practices discussed in the application such as photos, evaluations, marketing materials, press releases, exhibit plans, etc. Supplementary materials submitted in PDF form only, with a ten-page limit.

Review Process:
The Outstanding Practice in Children’s Museums Award will be reviewed by peers from within the children’s museums field and subject area experts from outside the field, who will judge the applications based on the following criteria:

- How successful the experience, program, or business practice outlined in the application has been for the museum.
- How unique and scalable the practice is for the children’s museum field. Scalability includes replicability of the practice across different size museums in different geographical regions.
- How well the practice described relates to one of the four dimensions chosen on the application.

Award:
Recipients of the Outstanding Practice in Children’s Museums Award will receive:

- Recognition at the Awards Dinner during InterActivity.
- A seal to display on their website and other publicity materials.
- Recognition on ACM’s website.
- One free registration to InterActivity for the year awarded.