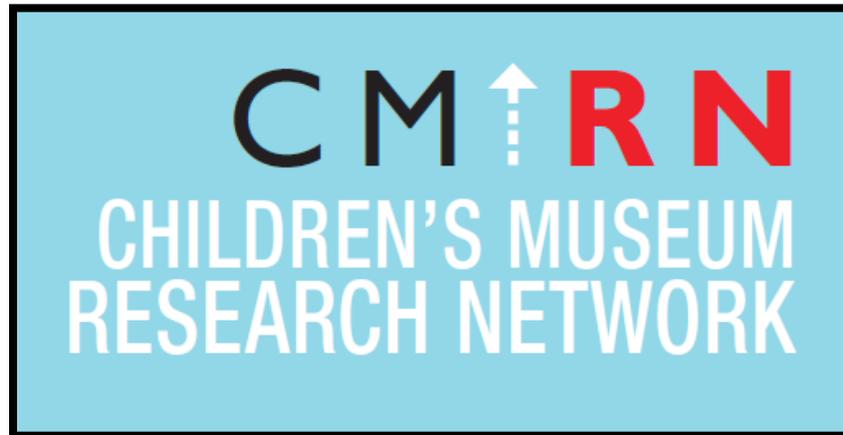


Children's Museum Research Network

Summary of SIG #2 Study Results

Practitioners Reflections on Play at their Institutions (SIG #2)



Purpose of Study

The CMRN's first project focused on children's museums beliefs about learning through an analysis of learning frameworks of five partner museums. As the network's second project (i.e. SIG #2), this study focuses more specifically on play and learning within a larger sample of children's museums.

Research questions:

- *How do children's museums (the institutions, not the employees) conceptualize play?*
- *How do these museums position their institutions and their work relative to play?*

Methodology

A stratified random sampling (based on size, geographic region, and location) of ACM member institutions was developed. One staff member from each institution was identified at each institution to be interviewed. Staff members were individuals in senior positions who oversee the design and/or implementation of learning experiences. The goal of the interview was to gain an institutional perspective related to play and learning. Questions focused on the role of play in the mission of the museum, definitions of play, types of play, indicators of play, the relationship between play and learning, measuring play and the benefits of play. Members of the CMRN conducted semi-structured interviews by phone. Interviews were recorded, transcribed by a professional transcription service, and then analyzed by the research team.

Description of Sample

49 staff members participated in the interviews. The interviewee's roles included: education (44%), executive director (27%), exhibits (27%) and board member (2%).

- Representative of ACM's membership:
 - Region—Midwest, South, West, Northeast
 - Location—Urban, Suburban, Rural
 - Budget/Size—50% with an annual budget of less than \$1 million, another 17% with budgets between \$1-2 million
 - The majority of those interviewed were staff at a museum founded in 1990 or later (see table at right).

Museum Longevity (Date Founded)	Study Sample
1974-1979	16%
1980-1989	23%
1990-1999	49%
2000-2005	12%

- In the follow-up study, museums were asked when their current mission was written:
 - Mean year the missions were written was 2008; median year was 2011
 - So although the mean year of founding of the museums in the original sample was 1990, the missions of these museums are generally much newer, typically less than 10 years old. (n=25)
- Museums were also asked how likely it was that their mission would be revised in the next 3 years:
 - 31% indicated it was "Very unlikely," 35% "Somewhat unlikely," 27% "Somewhat likely" and 8% "Very likely" that their mission would be revised in the next 3 years.
 - There was no apparent relationship between when the museum's mission was written and how likely staff thought it was to be revised in the next 3 years.

Findings by Theme

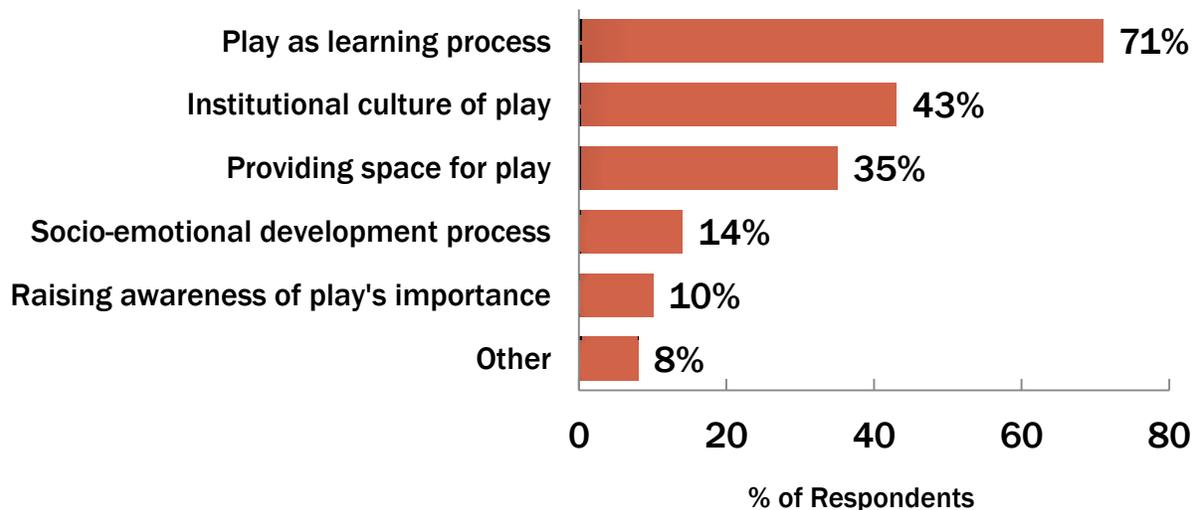
Visibility of “Play” in the Institution’s Mission (59 responses from 49 Respondents)

Visibility of Play	Number of Responses	Percent of Respondents
“Play” is in the mission	28	57%
“Play” is in other statement	7	14%
Play is implied	15	31%
Other	9	18%

The team looked at factors such as region, location, budget/size, and longevity, to see if any of these made a difference in terms of whether museums had play in their mission. None of them seemed to make a difference.

Role of “Play” in the Institution’s Mission (89 responses from 49 respondents)

The question was phrased as being about the role of play in the mission. Respondents, however, provided answers that were about the role of play in their activities. Their responses are not so much about their mission statement, but rather about the role of play in the museum’s activities that are intended to achieve the mission. See the chart on the next page for the coding categories and response rates.



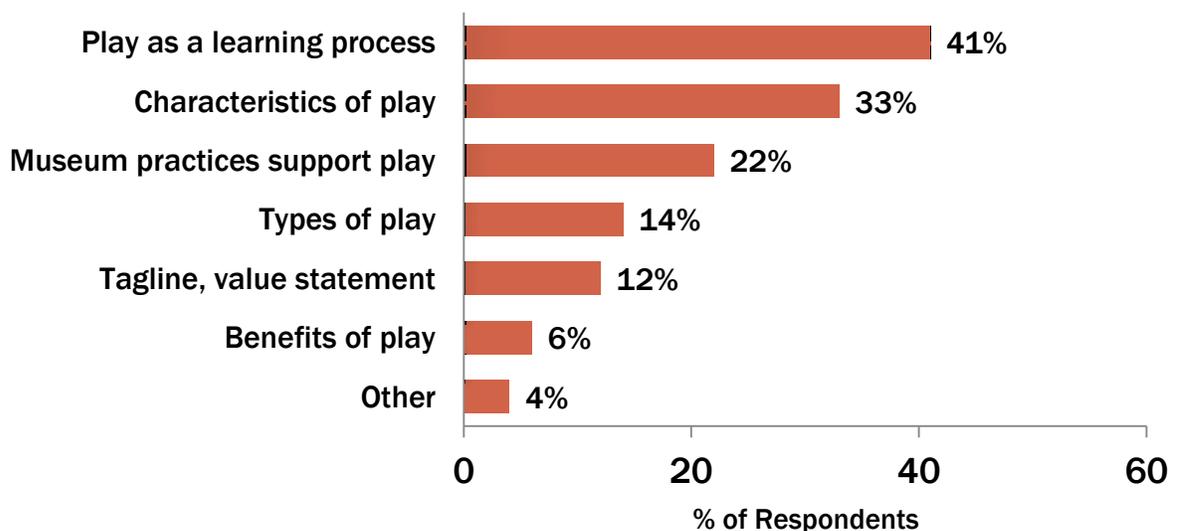
The team looked specifically at the 5 museums with a written definition of play, as well as those museums that said they had play in their mission, to see if they answered this question differently than the rest of the sample. They did not – there were no differences.

Presence of a Definition of Play

Of those interviewed, 29% (14 respondents) responded that their institution did have a definition of play. However, as the CMRN delved into these definitions, many were found to be general values or belief statements about play and not definitions of play. When these museums were asked if their definition of play was written, only 5 of the total 49 respondents (10%) indicated that their museum did have a written definition of play. The museums with written definitions are all urban, and are all older than the average museum in the sample (with all being founded pre-1985, whereas the average founding year for the entire sample was 1990).

The other 71% (35 respondents) indicated that their institution did not have a definition of play. Reasons for not having a definition included 1) that since their museum was small, presumably with a small staff and little hierarchy, there was no need for definitions and 2) play is anything, everything that occurs within their institution.

Nature of the Definition of Play, whether written or not (65 responses form 49 respondents)

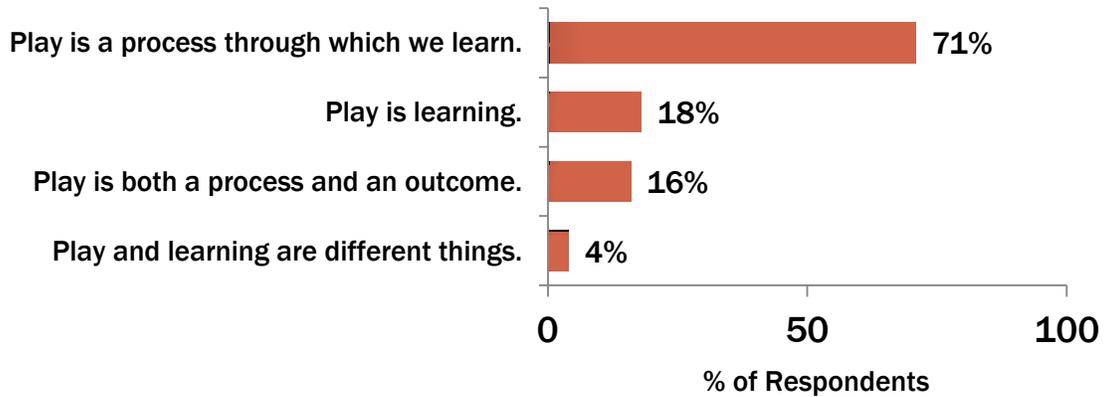


Below are examples for each coding category to illustrate how interview responses were grouped by theme:

- *Characteristics of play*: Fun, intrinsically motivated, free-choice
- *Play as learning process*: Engagement, exploration, discovery

- *Benefits of play:* Social growth, skill development
- *Types of play:* Creative play, object play
- *Broad value statement or tagline:* Play is crucial to learning, play with purpose
- *Practices that support play:* Providing space to play; play is what the museum provides

Relationship between Play and Learning (54 responses from 49 respondents)



Benefits of Play (121 responses from 49 respondents)

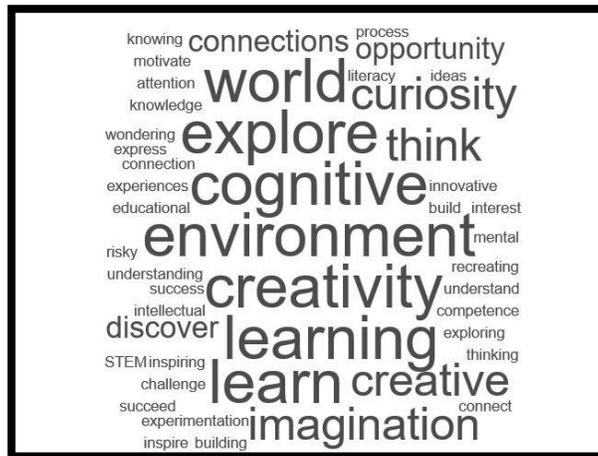
Coding Category	Number of Responses	Percent of Respondents	Interview Examples
Social development	33	67%	Communication, cooperation, family bonding and relationships
Cognitive development	32	65%	Content knowledge, critical thinking, and creative thinking
Emotional development	29	59%	Self-confidence, self-control, comfort, and feelings
Physical development	12	24%	Motor skills, and fitness
Self-direction	8	16%	Ownership of own play and learning, child-driven, exploration
Other	7	14%	

Word clouds were developed based on textual responses to questions about the benefits of play.

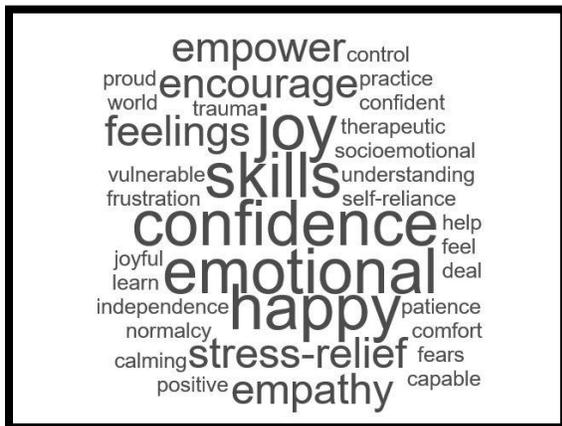
Social Benefits of Play



Cognitive Benefits of Play



Emotional Benefits of Play



Presence of a Measurement of Play

- 20% (or 10 respondents) indicated that their institutions measure play. Three of these 10 museums were among the 5 that had a written definition of play; the 7 other museums measuring play do not have written definitions of play.
- Although the interviewers indicated their institution was measuring play, in the view of the CMRN, only 6 of the 10 were measuring play. When asked to describe what they are measuring, the others were measuring benefits/outcomes of play or observing how visitors interacted with exhibit to determine if the exhibit is being used as intended or in a safe manner.
- 77% (or 38 of the respondents) reported their museums were not measuring play. Of these, 11 specifically cited a lack of resources or capacity to pursue measuring play, although many were doing other types of evaluation or assessment.

Indicators of Play

While all museums are not measuring play, because of staffing, resources, or other reasons, if they were to begin—or the field were to come to a common understanding of the need to measure play—there is some common ground in the indicators of play listed by the practitioners interviewed.

(121 responses from 49 respondents)

Coding Category	Number of Responses	Percent of Respondents	Interview Examples
Interacting with Objects/Exhibits	35	71%	Using props/costumes, climbers
Interacting with People	34	69%	Asking questions, parent involvement, role play
Engagement	21	43%	Concentration, focus, determination, curiosity, creativity
Enjoyment	17	35%	Smiling, laughing, fun, joyful
Child-directed	10	20%	Self-directed, free choice
Other	4	8%	

Findings from the Follow-Up Study

Overview

Several members of the CMRN noted that interview participants indicated a desire to seek more information or take some follow up action after the interview. To determine if participants did take action afterwards, a follow-up study was conducted via SurveyMonkey in February 2017 (approximately 6 months after the initial telephone interviews). 30 individuals, a sub-set of those who were interviewed, responded to the survey.

Purpose was to gather data on:

1. The age of the museum's current mission statement.
2. Activities (with co-workers or solo) that were prompted by participating in the interview.
3. Awareness of and suggestions for the CMRN.

57% reported speaking with a co-worker about play and their museum after participating in the interview. (n=30) Conversations commonly covered:

- The need for a more explicit position on play and its value for communicating impact to visitors, collaborators, and funders.
- A heightened mindfulness of play as a result of interview participation—how they think and talk about it, how it relates to their mission, what they currently do and things they may wish to change.

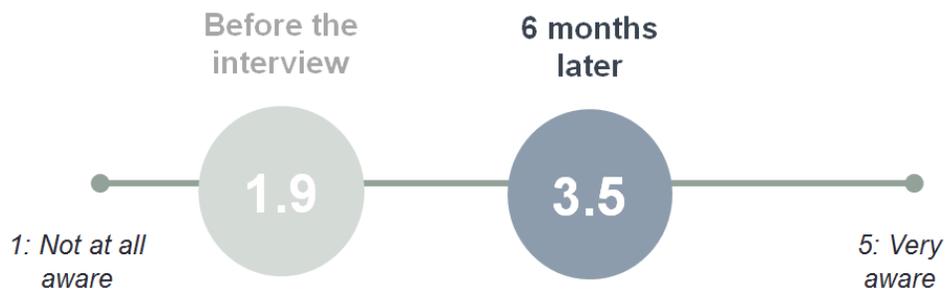
"It prompted us to have a conversation about what we think about with play versus what we think our visitors think about it. In particular, for our museum, we discussed how to talk about play in our grants so that we can properly convey its importance."

58% reported doing something *other than* talking to co-workers as a result of participating in the interview which included (n=26):

- Seeking out more information on play, using journals, blogs, websites of ACM and other children's museums, etc. (50%).
- Individual reflective thinking about their institutions position on play, often in relationship to training, growth, and program and exhibit design (31%).
- Reviewing, updating, and/or sharing their own institutional documents (25%).

Understanding of the CMRN

Respondents reported an increase in awareness of the CMRN from before the interview to the date of the survey. Retrospective pre to post: Mean ratings are reported in the slide. Pre-interview 54% rated their awareness a “1.” In Feb 2017, 6 months later, the largest percentage of respondents rated their awareness a “4” (38%). (n=26 for pre and post)



What type of information, if any, do you think the Children’s Museum field would find helpful with regards to the Research Network and its work?

- CMRN research results and application (47%): included 1) results of this study, 2) results of any study, and 3) results on suggested topics (parental engagement, parent-child interaction, staff-visitor interactions)
- Unpacking and supporting Play (35%): included 1) evidence on/rationale for why play is important, 2) best practices to support/encourage play, 3) tools for staff training around play, 4) underlying theory that supports the above
- Leverageable evidence of the field’s impact (24%), namely Evidence that a museum could use to bolster its mission, fundraising, grant applications
- How to reach/support a specific audience (18%)
- How to get involved with research and/or the CMRN (12%)
- Other topics (18%)

Conclusions and Next Steps

Findings from this study show that while play is important to the field, there is a lack of clear consensus regarding the role of play in experiences at children's museums. Interview data will guide the field's exploration of how play relates to practice, the various arguments and counterarguments that speak to the need for a definition of play, and the variety of definitions and approaches that children's museums currently have related to play.

The CMRN plans to share this project with the larger field of children's museums through presentations at ACM's InterActivity in May 2017 and two articles: 1) an empirical research article reporting the findings and suggesting next steps for the field and 2) a practice-based article that will suggest how children's museums can act on the next steps outlined in article 1. The timeline for writing and publishing articles in journals such as the *Journal of Museum Education* can be lengthy; the anticipated publication dates are late 2017 or early 2018.