GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT THE VALUE OF PLAY IN CHILDREN’S MUSEUMS
The Problem of Play:
Play is a central, defining concept for many children’s museums, but it is also problematic.

It is not well-understood, despite existing research.
It is undervalued at a policy level.
It is difficult to define.

Our Question:
How do children’s museums position themselves and their work around play?
Thinking about your museum’s mission, does it include the word “play”?

Is play implied in other terms?
When was the last time you were part of a conversation amongst staff at your museum that was even loosely about play?

[10 Minutes]
DISCUSSION GROUPS

- Does your museum have what you would consider to be a definition of play?
  - If so, what is that definition? Is it written down?
  - If not, how would you describe the way your museum talks about what play is?

[10 Minutes]
What is the relationship between play and learning? (from your institution’s perspective)

[10 Minutes]
What is the Children’s Museum Research Network? (CMRN)

First research study: Learning frameworks within the network
Play emerged as a key issue
Research question for the second study:

How do children’s museums position themselves and their work around play?
STUDY METHODS

- Included 48 museums across the United States
- Sizes, locations, budgets closely matched to ACM membership
- Semi-structured telephone interviews with senior staff
- Interview questions related to:
  - Visibility & role of play in mission statement
  - Definitions of play used internally
  - Beliefs about connections between play and learning
  - And other topics (e.g., benefits of play, measures of play)
- Research Network collaboratively analyzed responses
Majority of museums said play was part of their mission
- “Play” is in mission (57%)
- “Play” is in other statement (14%)
- Play is implied (31%)

Majority said play was very important to their mission.
- On a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 7 (extremely important)
  - 7: 84%
  - 6: 6%
  - 5: 10%
ROLE OF PLAY IN MISSION/ACTIVITIES

- Play as learning process
- Institutional culture of play
- Providing space for play
- Socio-emotional development process
- Raising awareness of play's importance
- Other

% of Respondents
29% of museums had definitions of play used internally
10% had written definitions

Nature of Definitions (written or not)

- Play as a learning process
- Characteristics of play
- Museum practices support play
- Types of play
- Tagline, value statement
- Benefits of play
- Other

% of Respondents
Play is a process through which we learn.

Play is learning.

Play is both a process and an outcome.

Play and learning are different things.
SUMMARY

- Majority of museums said play was important to their missions.
- Most did not have a definition of play that they used internally.
- Even so, there was an underlying consensus about play’s role as a learning process.
FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Summary of Study Results: “Practitioners’ Reflections on Play at their Institutions (SIG#2)” [Available via InterActivity website after the conference]
- CAISE and IMLS blog posts about the Network:

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