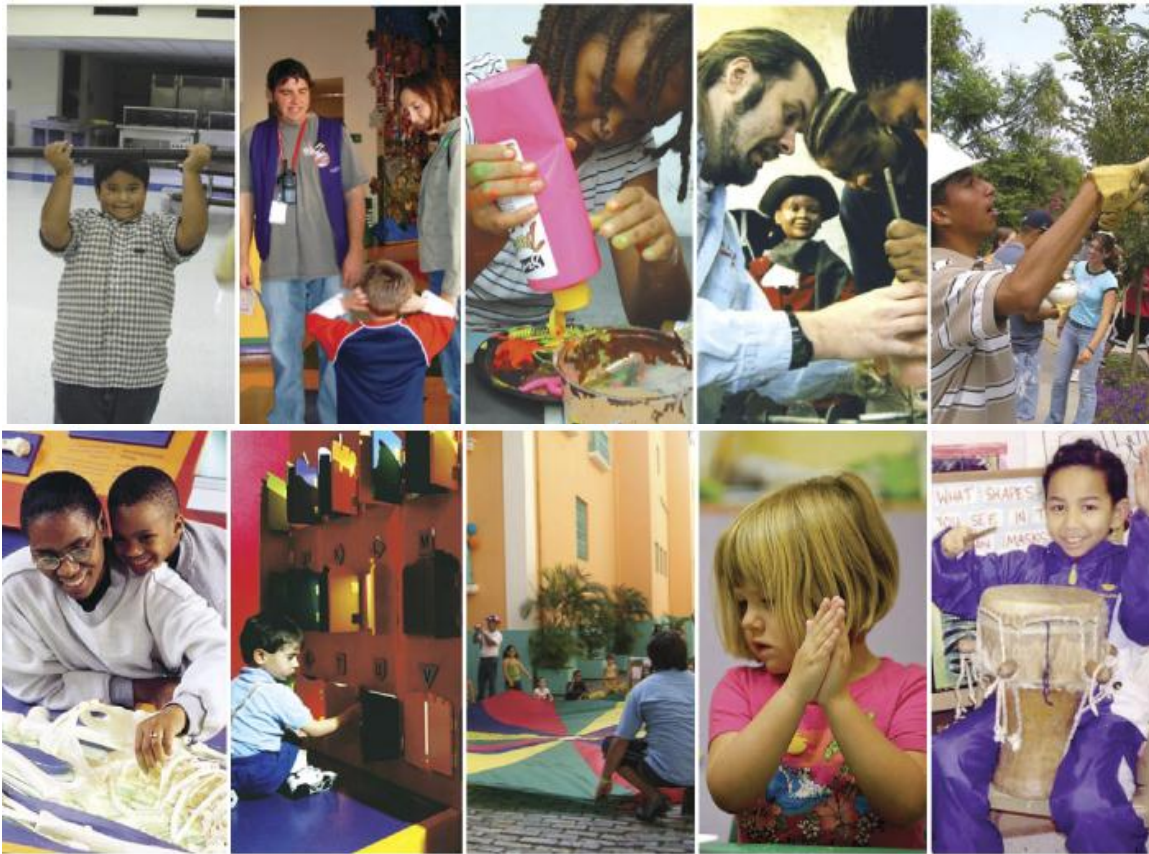


# ASSOCIATION OF CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS

## Standards for Professional Practice in Children's Museums



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CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS...WHERE CHILDREN LEARN THROUGH PLAY AND EXPLORATION  
IN ENVIRONMENTS AND EXPERIENCES DESIGNED JUST FOR THEM

## What are Children’s Museums?

Children’s museums are a pioneering and dynamic group of institutions that are challenging and redefining the boundaries of the traditional museum world and are always reimagining themselves.

Children’s museums emphasize the educational role of museums, the visitor (children and families), contextual interactive exhibit strategies and programs over the more traditional museum focus on the preservation/research role, permanent collections, and non-tactile display or presentation of objects.

In children’s museums, the needs and interests of the audience, the motivation to learn, and empowerment of the visitor through contact and direct experience with objects are as important as subject or content focus.

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## HOW SHOULD THIS GUIDE BE USED?

This document attempts to identify the needs and concerns of children’s museums and to avoid replication of standards commonly accepted as applying to the museum field as a whole. Therefore, it is the intent of ACM to encourage the use of other publications as companion documents and references. All children’s museums should be familiar with the following\*:

1. American Alliance of Museums Core Standards for U.S. Museums and Accreditation Self-Study - The criteria by which a museum should be operating are stated in the standards and inherent in the Self-Study questions.
2. Community Engagement Assessment - The community engagement self-study of the AAM Museum Assessment Program focuses on the public dimension of a museum.
3. Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums - The report by the AAM Task Force on Museum Education presents an expanded definition of the educational role of museums.

\* Available through American Alliance of Museums, 1575 I Street NW, Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005; (202) 289-1818. [www.aam-us.org](http://www.aam-us.org).

### Using the Standards

The standards outlined in this document are intended for use in several ways:

- As an educational tool for children’s museums that are in the planning stages or newly opened so that they are aware of professional expectations commonly accepted by the children’s museum field.
- As a guide for children’s museums that are in operation and are striving to achieve higher levels of professionalism; the guide will be useful in long range planning processes and in staff and board orientation to the field of children’s museums.
- As a benchmark for children’s museums that are seeking accreditation from the American Association of Museums. These standards will be used by AAM visiting committees to help them evaluate the levels of professionalism found in the applicant museum.

### History of the Standards

The standards and self-study were developed by the Association of Children’s Museums Self-Study Task Force with broad involvement from its members. The project was supported by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

## DEFINITIONS

### **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 non-profit institutions<sup>1</sup>, essentially educational in purpose, with professional staff, which utilize objects and are open to the public on some regular schedule.

### **Collections:**

Objects, living or nonliving, that museums hold in trust for the public. Items usually are considered part of the museum's collections once they are accessioned. Some museums designate different categories of collections (permanent, research, educational) that functionally receive different types of care or use. These categories and their ramifications are established in the museum's collections management policy.

### **Collections Management Policy:**

A collections management policy is a written document, approved by the governing authority, which specifies the museum's policies concerning all collections-related issues, including accessioning, documentation, storage, and disposition. Policies are general guidelines that regulate the activities of the organization. They provide standards for exercising good judgment.

### **Object:**

As defined for children's museums, objects primarily serve as tools to motivate learning and address the developmental needs of children. They are instruments for carrying out the children's museum's educational objectives, and reflect these purposes. The mode of presentation is substantially interactive and contextual. Objects may not necessarily have intrinsic value to science, history, art, or culture, and can include constructed activity pieces and exhibit components.

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<sup>1</sup> Non-profit status applies to U.S.-based museums.

<b>MISSION/PLANNING</b>
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The mission statement defines the purpose of the museum and the means by which it achieves its purpose (what it will and will not do as an institution). A strong, clear, concise mission statement is important in creating a foundation for a shared vision for the museum and in setting the stage for effective leadership of the institution<sup>2</sup>. As a museum evolves as an institution the mission statement will evolve also.

A strategic plan is critical to any museum as a guide to future institutional development but especially for children's museums given the rapid rate at which these museums tend to grow and expand. A strategic plan establishes the desired direction and goals of the museum, assesses needs and resources (present and potential), and sets forth strategies to achieve goals. Strategic plans commonly address a three to five year time span with provisions for regular updates (such as on an annual basis).

### **Standards for Professional Practice**

1. The mission statement is a written document that has been formally approved by the board of trustees or governing body. It is in accord with the purposes of the museum as set forth in the museum's charter, articles of incorporation/bylaws, or other legal documents.
2. The mission statement is reviewed periodically and revised when necessary.
3. All museum activities are measured against its mission statement. Policies, programs, exhibits, and collections are evaluated against the mission.
4. A mission statement specifies children as the audience (and associated audiences as appropriate) since this is a major distinguishing characteristic of the field. It can delineate the visitor age group that the museum targets since this will determine or impact the focus of the museum and the expertise needed to appropriately serve them, e.g., ages 2-12, or the inclusion of adolescents. Because of the wide diversity of children's museums, it is helpful to know the content or disciplines that the museum focuses on in order to get a full picture of the museum's activities; some children's museums specialize in art, science, etc., while others are generalist and address a variety of subjects.
5. The museum has a strategic plan with metrics to guide the future direction of the museum and the plan is formally approved by the Board.
6. The museum has a philosophical framework or written core values encompassing its beliefs about education and learning theories and methods for stimulating curiosity and learning for children. The framework is used to determine appropriate exhibit and program content, design and format.

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<sup>2</sup> Sample mission statements are included in the Collective Vision toolkit available on the ACM Web site.  
Children's Museums Standards Document<sup>®</sup> • Association of Children's Museums • [www.ChildrensMuseums.org](http://www.ChildrensMuseums.org)

<b>EXHIBITS AND PROGRAMS</b>
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### **Exhibits and Programs**

Children’s museums are audience-based and reflect their communities, always striving to identify and meet community needs. Therefore, each children’s museum is unique and “community specific.” This uniqueness results from a collaborative process with community groups. Not every exhibit or program will be unique since there are many existing exhibits and program models that are effective and are found in many children’s museums because they do work. All children’s museums place an emphasis on interactive and experiential exhibit strategies, but each develops its own character and identity as it grows and matures.

Children’s museums have a strong internal commitment to teamwork, especially in the development and design of exhibits. Commonly the approach to exhibit development involves team coordination of staff representatives with expertise in areas of educational/child development theory, content/discipline specialties and exhibit design. The team draws on other staff capabilities and outside resources as appropriate and utilizes some form of visitor input.

Children’s museums rely heavily on floor staff and volunteers to interface directly with visitors in exhibits and programs. Research indicates the importance of facilitation, mediated learning, and apprenticeships in supporting informal learning. Children’s museums are labor intensive institutions because the application of these findings requires a substantial commitment of human resources. Training for staff and volunteers is critical to effectively enhance the play and learning experience for the visitor.

Evaluation is a necessary component for enhancing the effectiveness and assessing the success of a museum’s exhibits and programs and is given as high a priority as resources will allow.

### **Standards for Professional Practice**

1. Children’s museums create, rent, replicate and adapt interactive exhibits and programs that address community needs (e.g., literacy, STEM learning, health, diversity, early learning) and motivate learning. Furthermore, children’s museums employ play as the accepted methodology for how a child learns.
2. In duplicating or adapting an exhibit, acknowledgment is given to the original developers when known. In such cases, a museum is aware of legal issues pertaining to intellectual property, copyrights, trademarks, etc.
3. There is wide latitude for the definition of “interactive” and each museum defines what it means for that museum. Since children’s museums provide hands-on learning, the majority of exhibits are interactive in a meaningful way.
4. Children’s museums staff have expertise in learning theories, educational methodologies for stimulating curiosity and motivating learning, developmental appropriateness, current scholarly research and social issues impacting children. These bodies of knowledge are incorporated and addressed in the development of exhibits and programs.
5. Children’s museums employ a team or shared process for developing exhibits and programs.
6. Exhibits are built and maintained to withstand heavy interactive use with the development process addressing preventive maintenance. Exhibits are kept in working order and repaired in a timely manner.

7. The overall maintenance, cleaning, and painting of the children's museum is done on a regular schedule in order to reflect an overall attitude of respect for children and families and their need for clean, safe and welcoming spaces.
8. Exhibit maintenance procedures are designed to minimize childhood health/sanitation problems, the spread of contagious diseases, and injuries and accidents. Materials are carefully selected to minimize safety and health hazards to children and visitors.
9. In attempting to best serve the needs of diverse visitors, children's museums establish and cultivate broad community based networks and relationships with other educators and child care providers, and social service agencies. These resources are utilized in exhibit and program development and evaluation.
10. The role of staff and volunteers in facilitating learning for visitors is clearly defined. Appropriate training in child development and informal and interactive learning in a museum setting is provided on an ongoing basis.
11. Evaluation of exhibits and programs is incorporated into the development process. Formative evaluation including prototyping is utilized. Summative evaluation is utilized in assessing impact of exhibits and programs.

## **Object Use**

A number of children's museums have permanent collections in the traditional sense that is they are not only used for educational purposes, but for preservation and research as well. Other children's museums do not have permanent collections but utilize educational collections (see definition section). Whether or not a children's museum has a permanent collection depends on its mission and vision; moreover, a museum must have sufficient institutional resources to care for a permanent collection properly. Sometimes a children's museum will decide to establish a permanent collection later in its institutional maturation.

For museums with permanent collections, a collections management policy is a well-established prerequisite for professionalism recognized throughout the museum profession and already addressed through commonly accepted museum standards. Children's museums that choose not to establish collections are advised to adopt policies governing the care, use and acquisition of objects since they may typically receive offers of donated objects, borrow objects or exhibits from other institutions, host touring exhibitions, etc.

## **Standards for Professional Practice**

1. All children's museums with permanent collections have a written collections management policy that sets forth the museum's policies regarding objects in its care. Policies follow established museum guidelines and address acquisition, management and record keeping, storage and care, loans, and deaccessioning.
2. Children's museums with educational collections have written object management policies that describe its philosophy toward the management of these collections. Policies address donations, inventory procedures, storage, care, loans (of both objects and exhibits), and disposal of items in these collections.
3. Children's museum staff are trained in techniques for working with objects as teaching tools and in exhibits that communicate their meaning or message to the visitor while maintaining the proper levels of protection and preservation as dictated by the institution's collections management policy.
4. Children's museums enter into written agreements when borrowing exhibits as well as objects.



<b>PUBLIC DIMENSION</b>
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Because children’s museums are child and family centered institutions, their sense of responsibility to their community and the children and families they serve is central to their mission. Community and audience engagement, dialogue, collaboration and participation are therefore strong values shared by children’s museums. A deep commitment to these values is found infused throughout institutional operations and decision making (ranging from Board and staff selection to the exhibit and program development processes).

Meaningful involvement of children in the museum is an integral part of demonstrating and fostering a fundamental respect for children. Their direct participation can take many forms and may take place on many levels depending on such factors as institutional philosophy and leadership, scope of museum activities, nature of the community and level of the museum’s resources. As an example, one form of engagement at many children’s museums is the establishment of a Children’s Advisory Board.

Children’s museums are committed to equity, e.g. reflecting the diversity of our society in terms of race, ethnic origin, age, gender, social/economic status, ability or disability and educational attainment in all museum activities.

### **Standards for Professional Practice**

1. Children’s museums have methods for inviting, listening to and incorporating the voices of children and families into facility, exhibits and programs (e.g., focus groups, children’s advisory boards, surveys).
2. Children’s museums have a deep understanding of the community, which includes: population size; age range; ethnic and racial composition; economic levels; and other demographic information. It understands its current audience and analyzes potential audiences in order to develop museum activities with the widest possible impact.
3. Children’s museums incorporate accessibility and universal design for all visitors in its facility, exhibits and programs. “Accessibility” is used here in its broadest sense, including visitors with disabilities, low literacy skills, visitors speaking other languages, visitors with diverse economic backgrounds, etc.
4. Children’s museums take precautions to protect the visitor from potential hazards. Children’s museums monitor the safety of visitors on an ongoing basis.
5. Children’s museums have emergency and disaster plans/procedures in place and regularly provide training in those procedures, including but not limited to building evacuation, first aid and CPR for staff and volunteers.
6. Children’s museums reach targeted audiences in creative and responsive ways. The museum evaluates its effectiveness in reaching those audiences on an ongoing basis.

**CHILDREN'S MUSEUM SELF-STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE**  
**LEADERSHIP CONSIDERATIONS FOR MISSION PLANNING STANDARDS**

**Mission/Planning**

1. Does your mission statement identify children as your primary audience and recognize other audiences involved with children?
2. Based on your mission, how do you serve the needs of children? How do you measure how well you fulfill your mission?
3. Based on your mission, on what subject areas/themes do your exhibits and programs focus?
4. Describe the key educational philosophies and methods you use to stimulate curiosity and motivate learning for children?
5. Does your museum have a written strategic plan? What is the time period that it covers? Has it been approved by the board? Were staff and board members involved in developing the plan? What are your measures (metrics) for determining success? How are you measuring your achievement of the plan's metrics?

**Exhibits and Programs**

**Exhibits and Programs**

1. To what extent are your exhibits unique or reflective of your museum's audience? Are the museum's exhibits and programs "community specific"? Describe the process you use to ensure they reflect your community's character and needs.
2. How does your museum define "interactive"? Are the majority of your exhibits and programs interactive, engaging the visitor in meaningful participatory activity?
3. Expertise: Explain how you obtain expertise in child development/learning (e.g., through staff or through others such as advisors or consultants, board members, etc.).
4. In the development of your exhibits and programs, how do you incorporate the following?
  - a) Learning theories
  - b) Educational methods for stimulating curiosity and motivating learning
  - c) Developmental appropriateness
  - d) Current scholarly research
  - e) Social issues that impact children
5. Describe how exhibits are developed, built and maintained to withstand heavy interactive use.
  - a) Is the development process grounded in learning theory and content expertise?
  - b) Does the development process address preventive maintenance?
  - c) What percentage of the time are your exhibits in working order?
  - d) Are they repaired in a timely manner?

- e) Do you have a maintenance schedule?
  - f) Are precautions taken in exhibit design and maintenance procedures to minimize childhood health/sanitation problems, the spread of contagious diseases, injuries and accidents?
7. How do you evaluate the effectiveness of your exhibitions and programs? How is this information used to review and modify them?
  8. What relationships do you have with other educators and child advocates in your community (e.g., schools, museums, child care providers, social agencies, etc.)? How do you serve these groups? How do you use these resources in your exhibit and program development and evaluation?
  9. What is the role of the staff and volunteers in facilitating learning for visitors? Describe to what degree the exhibits are independent or dependent on staff/volunteers presence.
  10. Describe training the staff and volunteers receive in the following:
    - a) Adult/child communication skills
    - b) Visitor interaction
    - c) Working with children and adults with disabilities
    - d) Issues of multiculturalism, gender, age
    - e) Developmentally appropriate expectations
    - f) Intergenerational learning

### **Object Use**

1. How are objects used to stimulate curiosity and motivate learning for children? How are they integrated into exhibits and programs?
2. Do you consider your museum to be a collecting or non-collecting institution? (Refer to the definition of “collection” on page 1.)
  - If it is a collecting institution, how do you define collections in your museum?
    - What types of collections do you have (e.g., educational, permanent, research)?
    - Do you have written collections policy?
    - Describe the nature of your collection(s) and how they are cared for.
  - If it is a non-collecting institution, describe your philosophy and practice regarding object care and use. Is the museum considering having the addition of collections in the future?

**Public Dimension**

1. Do you involve children and families directly in the operations, planning and/or decision making within your museum? If yes, how?
2. How does your museum incorporate accessibility for all visitors into both the facility and exhibits? “Accessibility” is used here in its broadest sense, including visitors with disabilities, low literacy skills, visitors speaking other languages, visitors with diverse economic backgrounds, etc.)
3. How does your museum take precautions to protect the visitor from potential hazards? How do you select materials for exhibits? What kind of training does the staff receive in safety and emergency procedures?
4. Explain how you identify and target audiences to market museum activities. How does targeting these audiences reflect your mission? How do you reach these targeted audiences? How do you evaluate your effectiveness in reaching them?