

Wednesday, February 19, 2020

## Changing Our Futures: Changing How We See Children



Glimpsing and engaging the potential of all children

My vision of the great opportunity that children's museums enjoy on behalf of children has greatly expanded over the last 40 years. When I helped start Madison Children's Museum in 1980 and when I worked at Minnesota Children's Museum, I was inspired by what was immediate, physical, and fascinating to children. I focused on the value of objects and environments in children's development, play, and learning; providing more children with richer, more varied environments; and expanding the range of objects and materials children could manipulate, investigate, and transform through exploration and play. Those are still compelling interests just as I believe that every museum must be a great place to visit, enjoyable for children and families to spend time together, bring friends, and celebrate.

With time and growth—mine, others involved with children's museums, and children's museums themselves—we've developed a deeper understanding of the fundamental relationship between the well-being of towns, cities, and regions and the well-being of children and families and how children's museums contribute to this.

While a children's museum may make a city more attractive to families, that's not enough.

The prospects of a town, city, or region and its children are closely intertwined. Children have a lot to gain or lose from [the quality of the towns, cities, or regions](#) where they live. **Children's museums have an opportunity to help change those lives.**

Imagine a city without children; a town without schools; or neighborhoods without playgrounds or young families. When cities do not value children or address their needs and those of families, families move away. These places become hollow. A city without children is a city without a future. Conversely, when children are attached to their neighborhoods, feel connected to place and cared for by their community, they want to stay, return, contribute to these places as adults. When children thrive, their communities thrive.

Alison Gopnik, professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, among many others, says the central project of every human community is to care for its children. At the core of this work is valuing children, which is much more than saying *we value children*. It requires demonstrating respect for



When children thrive, cities thrive.

niceties, opportunities we hope some lucky children enjoy. To the contrary, they are among the experiences critical to all children's optimal social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development and essential to children becoming strong, caring, responsible citizens. For all children these experiences provide a solid start in life. For many, they become protective factors against adversities children will encounter.

How we provide for our cities' and citizens' futures matters greatly. A town or city's quality is more than a vibrant place architecturally, socially, commercially. Strong towns and cities welcome children into civic life; invest wisely through their futures in their everyday and long-term decisions. Our cities, towns, and regions, along with children's museums, libraries, zoos, and schools, need to ask whether we are creating the future we want for our children.

### **Making Children Visible to the City**

Not only do children's museums help make cities more attractive, they also contribute to children becoming empowered and invested museum goers, agents in their own learning, and engaged, productive citizens.

Children's museums need to and want to matter. Purpose-driven organizations that serve tens of millions of children each year across this country and around the world, children's museums' foundational ideas converge around all domains of children's healthy development; developmental relationships with parents and caregivers; varied, engaging experiences with materials and environments; and supportive community connections.

Placing their audience in their name establishes children's museums' core interest. They are not about objects, but about people; they are not about something—art, natural history, science, but are *for* children. Whether large or small, established or fledgling, urban or rural, children's museums serve parents, caregivers, educators, and communities *because* they serve children. Serving children first has earned the loyalty and trust of children and families.

them by assuring their physical and emotional safety and a time and a place to be children. It demands that we appreciate them for who they are at every moment of their development, and are respectful of the great possibilities each child holds.

These  
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just



Strong towns and cities welcome children into civic life.

Places for children

In being for children, children's museums are attentive to what is intriguing to children. They create varied experiences that engage, encourage, and challenge children's continuously developing and emerging capabilities which may present as interests, skills, dispositions, or abilities that are capable of being developed, across all domains. Social places where family groups go to be together and connect with one another, children's museums are also spaces family, school, and community groups from across a region meet and interact. Woven into the community fabric, they help build a sense of belonging and add to the

region's infrastructure for well-being. Whether occupying a large stand-alone building or operating in a small shared space, whether in a 5,000 or 400,000 s.f. space, every children's museum space stands as an investment and belief in children's potential, what is possible but not yet fully actual.

Children's museums' long-term interest in and knowledge about children represent a prime opportunity to **make children, their capabilities, and strengths visible to the city** and to shape how cities and their residents view, value, and understand children.

Everyday these museums welcome hundreds and thousands of babies, big kids, and teens and engage and support parents, caregivers, and teachers. They use and conduct research to inform practices; create interactive experiences with objects, environments, and other visitors; they expand and enrich children's understanding of their worlds. Across multiple media platforms children's museums communicate their messages, share stories, and promote their activities and events to members, partners, and the larger community. They display children's constructions, projects, and accomplishments. Outreach and mobile units take children's museums into schools, parks, libraries, and neighborhoods.



Shaping how we view, value, and understand children

### **This Remarkable Opportunity**

**Children's museums' remarkable opportunity is that they both invite children to get to know their communities and they invite communities to get to know their children.** Fulfilling this opportunity relies on championing an image of the child—of all children—as actively interested in the world, attuned to possibilities, open to relationships, and full of potential.

Every one of us carries an image of the child inside of us. This image is critical because how we see children shapes our expectations of them as individuals and as a group. Whether they are our own children, museum visitors, students, or neighbors; whether we see them as responsibilities, consumers, or





contributors, our image affects how we relate to, talk with, observe, and understand them and choose opportunities for them.

It is impossible to overstate the power of this image. If children grow up into our image of them—and we know they do—wouldn't we much prefer that they grow up being curious, resourceful, helpful, caring, confident? Yet, carrying an image of the child based on strengths and possibilities rather than weaknesses is harder than we imagine.

While many museums have statements about valuing and respecting children, even the firmest beliefs in children as capable and competent encounter contrary forces, images, and messages

about them in and outside the museum.

For starters, we have long been underestimating children because of their size, their short attention spans, their physical activity, and everything they have yet to learn. Over the last 40 years of research on children, however, we have found out *not* children's weaknesses and problems, but their capabilities and assets. Research tells us that children are born knowing a lot about the world and other people; that long before they can read or write, they have extraordinary powers of imagination and creativity; that they start understanding the mind before the age of 2. Everyday observations of children confirm they are always on the verge of something new.

Unfortunately, when we don't focus on potential and strengths—children's or others'—we tend to focus on problems. We see limitations and deficiencies needing to be fixed. Rather than being attentive and amazed by what children have accomplished and can do by 2, 5, or 8 years, we focus on what they don't know or can't do. Often, we confuse the fact that children are novices in areas in which they have an understandable, age-related, limited range of experience with their not being capable. Think of the many children 3 or 4 years and younger who develop an impressive fund of knowledge on topics interesting to them. Their expertise may be dinosaurs, earth-moving machines, horses, or sports stars. They use accurate terminology, have domain-appropriate schema, and make subtle distinctions that escape most adults. Their focus, persistence, and motivation to learn are apparent and impressive. Yet we focus on what they don't know, or that they can't spell or read.



Everyday, children are on the verge of something new.



The idea of making meaningful marks starts early

We also interpret emerging skills as failed efforts. When we see the marks that toddlers make on a page using pens or pencils, we see these marks as scribbles. Messy, careless, they don't resemble letters and numbers so they don't qualify as writing. We are unlikely to see them as a toddler's emerging understanding that marks have meaning; or as drawings that represent and communicate ideas; or as evidence of agency. And, while we are delighted to think about children having questions about why things happen and investigating them, we fervently hope these explorations aren't too messy, noisy, or active.

We have ample evidence of children as complex and complete from birth with an inherent competence and eagerness to learn, teach, and form connections. We also know that building on such an asset-based view of children is in the best, long-term interest of both communities and children. Too often, these views recede into the background, and may not be considered at all.

### Leading with a Strong Image of the Child

Individually and as a group, **children's museums need to be out in front, actively shaping a view of children as strong, capable, and essential to the community's well-being** as well as creating experiences that favor this view.

To make children and their potential, or potentials, visible, children's museums must firmly hold an image of the child as competent and full of possibility. While the particular image of the child is specific to each museum and its community, every image reflects strengths. And there is no lack of assets to highlight. Children are inquisitive, bold, and resourceful. They have ideas and hunches and negotiate with everything the environment brings to them. They are social, caring, and interested in relationships. They are thinkers, doers, experimenters, and learners. Inventors who collaborate, they are confident individuals who communicate. From birth, children are active agents in forging their understanding of the world.

While summarizing this on-going, life-changing work of building communities that value children for their strengths and potential is not simple, inevitably it involves the following.

- **Articulating a shared understanding of the child as strong, capable, and full of potential.** Each museum will find its own path to developing, working with, and broadly sharing an image that is: grounded in its vision and mission; explored through multiple, lively internal discussions; strengthened by on-going



Social, caring, interested in relationships...

observations of children; and based in research. **An image of the child becomes magnetic north across a museum in all of its work.**

- Reflecting on an evolving a view of the child. Centering the museum's language, thinking, planning, and practice around this image takes hold gradually. Over time, revisiting the museum's view of children, how it's understood in changing contexts becomes an established practice that generates new insights and shifts.

**This process deepens and enriches the image of the child and connects it to the museum's thinking, learning, creating, and growing.**

- Listening to and learning from children. Children's talk, gestures, and actions; what they make, and unmake; how they act with confidence or hesitation; what they choose and avoid provide a wealth of information about them and how they experience and understand their world. **Information and insights from children provide new perspectives and starting points for planning museum offerings.**



- Creating environments and experiences that are responsive to and leave room for children's unfolding capabilities.

Engaging children's strengths and potentials involves shifting from what they *should* do, to what they *can* do; from doing things in a *predetermined* way, to doing things *the child's way*; from teaching skills to activating skills.

**Emphasizing and amplifying strengths generate new, more inclusive approaches and a wider range of possibilities.**

- Capturing and documenting insights into children's capabilities.

Integrated into museum experiences as activities, text, and images, children's input and examples of children's projects, words, images, and drawings both inform and challenge adults' views of children and what they are able to do; and elevate their value of children's thinking, observation skills, and knowledge. **Compelling examples of**

**children's capabilities, children's words and images anchor the museum's messages about children and their strengths.**

- Cultivating a whole-hearted commitment from many stakeholders. Meaningful change in how a community values its children is unrealistic without shifting how we all see children. Children's museums' work helps partners, allies, and friends, towns, cities, and regions, recognize the importance of what is possible but not yet actual for children. **While caretakers of this work, children's museums must work closely with others and boldly lead this greater effort.**