

LEADERS IN INNOVATION AWARD WINNER THE POWER OF PLAY: INNOVATIONS IN MESSAGING THE MISSION

By Megan Fischer, Marketing & PR Manager, Providence Children's Museum

Providence Children's Museum recently won NEMA's inaugural Leaders in Innovation award for our work to communicate a consistent mission-driven message about the critical importance of children's self-directed play, through a major new exhibit and public programs, creative use of traditional and social media, and innovative community outreach and advocacy efforts.

One of our core convictions is that play is vital for children's healthy development. Through spontaneous, freely chosen play, children develop confidence, problem solving, conflict resolution, self-regulation and other significant skills. However, kids today increasingly lack time and space to play. With school standards, busy schedules and parents' safety concerns about playing outdoors, children are spending more time in front of television and video screens and in structured activities that don't have the developmental benefits of child-directed play.

To make our message about the need for play more visible and explicit, we opened *Play Power*, a major new exhibit celebrating the power of children's play, in October 2008. Active, imaginative play happens throughout the Children's Museum, but *Play Power* is about play. Kids and adults discover the playful power of air by sending objects spiraling through giant air tubes; create original musical compositions at a multi-sensory sound sculpture; explore cause and effect by building magnetic mazes; invent imaginary worlds as they transform an open-ended play space; and engage in other hands-on activities that vividly illustrate the importance of play.

The goals for *Play Power* are to advocate for child-directed play, to increase parents' understanding and appreciation of the value of play, and to communicate that if you *really watch* children play, it's clear that a lot of important learning is going on. These ideas are conveyed by a video of kids at play throughout the museum with explanations of how they're learning; labels that prompt parents' engagement; a parent resource area stocked

with books and take-home materials; and a talk-back board for sharing play stories, ideas and observations.

According to audience surveys, *Play Power* is clearly both a draw for new visitors and a reason to return – contributing to 10 consecutive months of record visitation – and has helped visitors perceive the museum in new ways. Last spring, museum staff observed and interviewed families in *Play Power* to see whether it prompted parents and caregivers to notice and appreciate their children's play,



and to determine the exhibit's impact on their attitudes about play. Parents commented that they saw value in their kids playing on their own – “figuring things out” and “using trial and error” – and reflected on the benefits of observing their children at play. They also expressed appreciation for the simplicity of the *Play Power* activities and materials and said they were inspired to take ideas home.

We have incorporated our mission-based message about the importance of play into *every* aspect of our work and communications. Play-focused public programs encourage free exploration of simple materials and interesting phenomena, and we developed playful exhibit- and program-inspired activity kits for the gift shop. “PlayWatch,” a regular feature in the Museum newsletter, shares stories and observations about the power of play reported by staff and volunteers. Staff contribute monthly articles to a local parents' website, full of ideas and resources for encouraging unstructured play. Even fundraising efforts focus on the need to support children's play.

Our behind-the-scenes blog provides a window into the development of exhibits and programs; the impact of our play-based community outreach; and staff conversations and observations about the playful, powerful moments that happen daily throughout the museum. The blog, other social media and our e-newsletter have allowed us to share articles and resources with a growing community of people interested in play and our work, which demonstrates to a broad audience that our commitment to play is truly a cross-departmental effort and that amazing moments big and small happen all the time at the museum – it's simply a matter of noticing.

To continue our play advocacy beyond our walls, we began presenting community screenings of “Where Do the Children Play?” a provocative documentary that examines why children have increasingly limited opportunities for unstructured play, especially outdoors. We have hosted five screenings and discussions with community partners, moderated by museum director Janice O'Donnell and panelists/conversation “instigators” including child advocates, urban planners, environmentalists and teachers. Audiences of parents, parks and recreation and planning personnel, school and college educators, and other community members have joined lively conversations about the importance of giving kids more opportunities for free play and outdoor play during the school day and in out-of-school-time activities.

From those discussions, it was apparent that many people are concerned about the lack of time and space for children's play – and that they were eager to keep talking. We addressed that need by launching a community discussion listserv – “PlayWatch: Connecting the Community to Promote Children's Play” (www.playwatch.org). The listserv has nearly 300 subscribers, who post questions, advice, events and links to articles and organizations that promote open-ended play, and engage in an active, enthusiastic dialogue

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about what they see happening with play in their communities.

Following a survey to gauge interest in a deeper exploration of topics that came up on the listserv, we hosted community conversations about “Making Places for Play” and “Building Community” this fall. The community events and listserv have enabled the museum to bring together people and organizations passionate about play, to facilitate an open exchange of ideas and information, and to foster a growing sense of community and shared purpose.

Our efforts have raised awareness of the need for play and have demonstrated the clarity, consistency and focus of our mission and messaging – a clarity and conviction shared by *all* staff and board members. We’re delighted to have positioned Providence Children’s Museum as a leading advocate and resource for children’s play and learning and as the hub for growing conversations about the importance of play.