

The Concept of a Children's Museum

The Children's Museum of Indianapolis is considered an innovator in both the museum and education fields. As interpreted by this museum, the concept of a children's museum differs from that of a standard museum in four specific ways:

- Education justifies every object, activity, and event. There is a purpose behind each display, a story to tell with each exhibit, and an idea to unfold in each gallery.



- Bright, vivid colors and dramatic lighting effects are used to capture attention. Labels are written in easily understood, contemporary language.
- Exhibits are designed carefully to afford even the youngest visitor a good look, and materials are presented in an identifiable sequence. Whenever possible, exhibits are "hands-on" or participatory in nature.

- No matter how sophisticated the exhibit, participation remains the most important source of learning.

The Children's Museum of Indianapolis offers nontraditional learning opportunities for children in 11 galleries focused on physical and natural sciences, history, world cultures, space, and the arts. A regular host of exhibits and activities on contemporary issues, the museum reaches beyond its walls with community improvement initiatives, family learning programs, and a dynamic Web site. In addition, museum staff members regularly provide consultation to other museums across the globe.

While formal education is the task of the school, museum education makes a unique and original contribution. Visitors to The Children's Museum can get their hands dirty at an archaeological dig, pace the platform of a Victorian railway depot, ride a turn-of-the-century carousel, sit in the driver's seat of an Indianapolis race car, and delve into the world of science through interactive experiments. There is even a separate hands-on gallery designed especially for preschoolers.

Active use of the artifact collection—as opposed to merely displaying it—is a trademark of The Children's Museum of Indianapolis. However, museum visitors also appreciate that precious and irreplaceable artifacts such as mummies, Indian beadwork, and other fragile treasures may be touched only with the eyes. All exhibits are enhanced by hundreds of special programs and classes offered each year, many of which are led by youth volunteers.

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Children's museums are found primarily in North America, with more than 350 youth museums in the United States alone. From big cities to small towns, the increase in the number of children's museums in recent years signals one of the fastest-growing trends in the museum world. For many youth, their experience in a children's museum is their first museum experience of any kind. Thus, children's museums become a vital link to encouraging youth to become lifelong museum visitors.

The Children's Museum of Indianapolis is unusual among youth museums because it maintains and uses a vast collection of more than 110,000 artifacts. Most youth museums do not use or do not have an artifact collection and rely on newer hands-on exhibits. Some are social-cultural museums, while others are science centers, nature centers, activity centers, or junior affiliates of art, history, or general museums. Some are housed in large modern buildings, while others can be found in renovated Victorian homes. Although the scope and subject for these institutions vary, education remains the primary purpose for all children's museums.