



P.O. Box 3000
Indianapolis, IN 46206-3000

317-334-3322
317-921-4019 fax

childrensmuseum.org

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Ready, Set, Play (and Learn!)

By Cathy Southerland

You gaze into your infant's eyes . . . and you see the infinite possibilities behind those eyes. It is pretty awe-inspiring, isn't it?

All infants are born ready to learn. The Children's Museum partnered with Harvard, MIT, and the Boston Museum of Science along with the National Science Foundation to conduct a study about early childhood learning. We learned that infant and toddlers learn concepts and behaviors significantly earlier than what was once thought. That research shows that young children's brains develop more rapidly between birth and age five than during any other subsequent period, cultivating 85% of their intellect, personality and skills by age five.

So it's clear, early experiences matter. From good prenatal health care and nutrition through developmentally appropriate experiences and an abundance of oral language, the young brain quickly forms as a learner. We see that young children have an incredible capacity to observe, explore, wonder, experiment, and play. We need to provide opportunities for them to do so.

At The Children's Museum, we recognize how a well-planned stimulating environment can dramatically contribute to developing those foundations of learning. For young children, this is done primarily through play, which is one of the reasons we created Playscape, a newly redesigned early childhood gallery for children five and under. In this new exhibit, there are areas or "worlds" with elements of art, music, nature, cause and effect, construction, and sensory play.

Through hands-on and engaging environments, our new research also shows that children retain information longer if they experience and learn together with a significant adult in their life (parent, caregiver, grandparent). While supporting a child's natural curiosity and development, we are helping optimize his / her learning. It may look like play . . . but it is the important work of young children. And you have the awesome responsibility of having fun with your child while they are doing their important work!

Playscape opens August 31, 2013 at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis. We also listened to what our visitors wanted and we are happy to report there will also be two family restrooms inside the exhibit space, a diaper changing station, and a Mothers' Room with private nursing areas complete with comfortable chairs, a changing table, and hot water for formula.

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