



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

**Psychology
Understanding Ourselves
Understanding Each Other**

PLAYSPACE, A WINDOW ON DEVELOPMENT
The Child Development Component of the APA Traveling Exhibition

PURPOSE

Playspace, a Window on Development, was developed and prototyped by Playspace staff at the Children's Museum, Boston, Massachusetts. The primary purpose of Playspace as an exhibit, is to provide a warm, inviting play environment for children from birth to four, and their adult companions. It is a place where adults can learn about child development by: watching children at various stages of development as they play; talking with other adult visitors and with staff; reading the exhibit's supporting materials.

GOALS

In designing this exhibit, our aim has been to create a setting that:

1. is inviting and interesting to both children and adults
2. is manageable for infants and young toddlers, yet challenging enough to hold the attention of older toddlers and preschoolers
3. is safe, given expert supervision, for all ages
4. demonstrates toys and activities that easily and inexpensively can be copied. For the most part, we use basic, everyday toys and supplies, although we have included a few things that are beyond the means of many parents when we have needed extra sturdiness or when a piece of equipment has been particularly successful with a museum audience

5. encourages adults to really look at children's play and to think about it from a developmental perspective
6. is fun for everyone - visitors and staff alike!

DESCRIPTION

Playspace, a Window on Development, is a self-contained 600 square foot area, separated from the rest of the exhibit by a 3 to 7-1/2 foot-high partition. There is a gate across the visitor entrance, to keep children from impulsively dashing out of the area. This frees adult visitors to concentrate on observing children's play, instead of being constantly on the alert for a disappearing child.

There are four major activity areas, of roughly equal size. Each offers a setting for different aspects of a child's development. The areas are:

1. **A LARGE-MOTOR ACTIVITY AREA**, with a climbing structure: In this area, children engage in activities that involve whole-body movement and coordination, such as climbing, jumping, and throwing. Adults can observe children at many stages of development, from toddlers taking their first, hesitant steps up a stairway, to preschoolers performing complex acrobatics.
2. **A ROLE PLAY AREA**: In this area, children exercise their imaginations and social skills and test their understanding of the world around them, by trying out different roles and creating and acting out different scenarios. Adults are able to observe different stages in the development of **social skills**, such as empathy and negotiation; **cognitive skills**, such as the ability to use one object or action to represent another, and the ability to distinguish between what is real and what is make-believe; and **cultural understanding**, of the human world that surrounds the child.

3. **A SMALL-MOTOR ACTIVITY AREA**, with materials for manipulative play, exploration of basic materials, art projects, and music and rhythm activities: In this area, children engage in activities that involve hand, finger and eye movement and coordination: manipulating small objects, such as puzzles, pegs, beads, table top blocks, crayons, markers, and brushes; practicing skills, such as pouring, filling and emptying; and imitating movement, such as clapping, and finger play. The music and rhythm activities involve language skills, such as listening, and imitating words, cadence, pitch and tempo. Adults can observe many stages in the development of fine motor skills, from the hit-or-miss manoeuvre of the young toddler, to the much more finely tuned movements of the older preschooler. To a lesser extent, because the process is more subtle, they are able to observe different stages in the development of musical skills.
4. **AN INFANT AREA**, with a floor mat, manipulative toys, and a wall mirror: In this area, infants explore and play with a variety of toys, explore their reflections in the mirror, and, as they are able, move around the space. Adults can observe infants at many different stages of development, from the nearly newborn, whose repertoire for exploration is limited to looking, listening and smelling, and who understands no words, to the one year old, who moves around the environment at will, who actively and purposefully explores everything within reach, and who understands, and can maybe even produce, several key words in his/her native language.

The infant area should not be part of the flow. Toddlers and preschoolers must be kept out of this area, if infants and their parents are to have a safe and enjoyable time. We can make an exception for older siblings who want to be in the space to play with the babies.

OTHER FEATURES

The interior walls support a few pieces of additional equipment, including a bulletin board.

Supporting materials for adult visitors include a wall-hung bulletin board, which serves as an information center for visitors where recent articles about young children are posted.

Most storage is located away from the visitor area.

The areas are separated from each other by benches. This helps define different activity areas, cuts down on distractions that tend to interfere with children's concentration, and discourages most children from madly dashing here and there. The benches provide comfortable seating for adults, and invite them to stay awhile and watch.

However, each area is easily accessible to the others. And since young children have relatively short attention spans, and most adult visitors will want their children to explore everything, there will be constant flow between areas, as visitors move from one activity to another. This flow includes movement of toys, as well as of people. A lot can be learned about children and how they think, by watching which toys they bring where, and for what purpose - so this activity, itself, becomes part of the exhibit, if viewed from a developmental perspective.

The space will comfortably accommodate a maximum of about 10 children, 2 infants, 10 adults and 2 or 3 staff. The exact number will depend on how much supervision the day's activities require, as well as how lively or tired the children are.

STAFF

Staff members are trained in early childhood development, and have had experience working with young children, in a daycare, preschool, or children's museum setting. They have had experience talking with parents about infants and children, and are comfortable doing so. They are informed about, and aware of the complexity of, contemporary parenting, social, and educational issues having to do with young children. Above all, they truly enjoy watching children play, talking with parents, and listening to them, and dealing with the minor crises and unexpected demands of an exhibit open to young children.

Adapted from Playspace description
The Children's Museum, Boston 1988



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PLAYSPACE STAFFING

Staffing level:

Minimum requirement: A person (staff or volunteer) with solid training and experience in early childhood education should be in the space any time it is open to the public. This person needs to be knowledgeable about educational theory and practice related to young children. He or she also must be familiar with the details of managing a space for children -- state regulations for health and safety; keeping the space clean and the toys and materials sanitized, etc. The person must be able to answer parent questions, deal with conflicts that arise between parents and children or between children in the space, and handle any emergency that might arise.

Other assistants (staff or volunteer) with little or no early childhood experience and training may work in the space, but always under the supervision of the experienced person.

Numbers of staff:

On days that are usually low attendance days for host museum: minimum staffing would be 1 experienced person with backup for lunch and breaks

On days that are usually high attendance (often weekends): minimum staffing would be 2-3 staff in space at all times. (1 experienced person and 1 or 2 assistants)

Volunteers can work effectively in the space as long as experienced staff are there to supervise. The space should not be left with only a volunteer on duty, unless the volunteer has early childhood experience. A drawback in using a large number of volunteers is that it takes time to schedule and supervise a multiplicity of people, to find replacements when a volunteer is absent, etc. If students are volunteering, arrangements need to be made for coverage during holidays when students go home, often the busiest times for the museum.

Training opportunities provided by APA:

Boston: The purpose of the training at The Children's Museum is to provide an already experienced early childhood educator with an opportunity to see how a

children's space works as a museum exhibit. Most museums hire PlaySpace Coordinators who have experience in daycare centers or in classrooms. They have never worked in a museum, and may be unfamiliar with the "fishbowl" quality of working in an area like PlaySpace where they are dealing with children and parents all at once, as well as being observed by other visitors. Boston also provides much information on different kinds of programming for the space -- art, music, movement, etc. and prepares the educator for the many situations arising in PlaySpace that require tact and sensitivity. Since our PlaySpace is based on concepts and designs developed by The Children's Museum, we think it important to send trainees directly to the source.

At host site: APA sends Maria Arnillas, who was PlaySpace Coordinator at the first site on the tour, to train staff and volunteers on site who will be working in PlaySpace. Maria works first with the Coordinator to do an inventory of all the items in PlaySpace and to set up the space and the storage area. She provides about 6 hours of training, discussing the differing roles of experienced and less experienced PlaySpace staff, and using case studies.

These training opportunities presuppose a level of expertise already possessed by the key staff running the space; they help to fine-tune this experience to the specific needs of this exhibit. They cannot, and are not intended to, provide the level of knowledge and experience that must already be present to manage the space.

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