

ARTICLE

Play For All at Chicago Children's Museum: A History and Overview

TAMARA GOLDEN AND LYNN WALSH

Abstract In 2004, Chicago Children's Museum founded the Play For All initiative, which creates a community where play and learning connect for visitors of all abilities. The Play For All team discovered that families with children with disabilities were looking for an opportunity to explore and enjoy the museum without limitations and the fear of being judged. CCM also learned that being ADA compliant was not enough; being accessible and inclusive meant going above and beyond the ADA. Children's museums are a rare treat where almost everything should be interactive and ready to be played with. The Play For All team has made significant changes to the exhibits, staff training, and programming at Chicago Children's Museum by working with local families with disabilities and partner organizations. A culture shift has taken place within CCM. Play For All is now a top priority when decisions are being made.

Since its inception in 1982, Chicago Children's Museum has been committed to serving children with disabilities. One of the institution's earliest access and inclusion programs linked young children with disabilities with older middle school "play guides"; this program continues today. In 2004, at the suggestion of an enthusiastic intern, Shannae Jackson, the museum realized that it could be doing much more to serve individuals with disabilities. As a result of Jackson's and staff members' work, the Play For All initiative was born. It expanded the scope of the museum's commitment from a single program to the award-winning museum-wide initiative that thrives today.

THE BEGINNING

Prior to 2004, the museum had been compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act, but going beyond the ADA had not been a focus. Jackson and staff members undertook

the task of discovering what the disability community wanted and needed from CCM. Jackson spent the summer developing ideas. With the help of museum staff, she conducted surveys with visitors. Early on in the survey process, staff realized that a very small population—mainly those who used wheelchairs or had other visible disabilities—were being reached through the museum's surveys. With this knowledge, the museum began to connect with organizations that worked with people with a variety of disabilities—including intellectual and physical. The volume of responses, and the eagerness with which respondents answered questions, were both surprising and humbling to the museum. Many expressed specific needs, namely private time at the museum, and an opportunity to meet and interact with families similar to their own. Most importantly, families were looking for a chance to explore and enjoy the museum without fear of being judged.

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Through the survey process, the museum learned that being ADA compliant was not enough, and that being truly accessible and inclusive meant going above and beyond the ADA. It meant asking questions, discovering needs, and following through with responses. In addition to surveying visitors with disabilities, the museum also administered surveys to staff who dealt directly with guests. One simple question was asked of staff: What is your comfort level when interacting with people with disabilities? The overwhelming response was that staff members were afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing, so they often did nothing at all. The findings further illuminated the fact that having an accessible facility was not enough if the museum wanted to be truly inclusive for people with disabilities. Staff, who are a critical part of the visitor experience, also needed to be provided with the tools to confidently welcome, include, and interact with all visitors. The need for regular, on-going disability awareness training for staff became apparent.

Survey results from community members and staff members were shared with the museum’s management team, and they recommended that the initiative move forward. More than 20 interested staff members attended the first Play For All team meetings. This produced an over-sized group with no designated leaders to set the course, however, and the initiative struggled for direction in the first year.

Jennifer Farrington, who is now president and CEO of Chicago Children’s Museum (she was vice president of Education at the time) recognized the need for defined leadership for this important initiative. She asked two zealous staff members to take charge. The authors, Tamara Golden and Lynn Walsh, two members of the museum’s education team with a passion for this particular work, became the Play For All committee. We realized that if



Photos 1 and 2. Investigating the exhibit WaterWays. All photos in this article are courtesy of Chicago Children’s Museum.

the initiative was going to grow and thrive, it would need the assistance of experts in the field of access and inclusion. We reached out to a number of Chicago-area disability organizations, asking for any assistance they could garner. The outpouring of support was just what was needed to keep the initiative moving forward.

Early efforts by the Play For All committee focused on training for guest-facing staff, as well as professional development for ourselves. Trainings came from a variety of sources and were generally low cost, if not free. One of the first trainings was facilitated by a mother whose family were members of Chicago Children’s Museum. As a professional in the Special Education field as well as a mother of children with disabilities, she was able to offer her own unique view of access and inclusion. Museum staff appreciated the honest and open feedback and personal accounts of her family’s visits to the museum. Another training, facilitated by an employee from the Chicago Public School system, focused on disability awareness and



etiquette. Having a visual disability herself, this trainer offered staff another type of opportunity to learn first-hand from a person with a disability and gain insight on how they could improve the experience at the museum for all visitors.

Guest-facing staff responded extremely well to the trainings. Post-training evaluations indicated that they were beginning to feel more comfortable interacting with visitors with disabilities. Additional trainings were requested by frontline staff. It soon occurred to the Play For All team that all staff, including management and office staff, could benefit from basic disability awareness training. This realization was key to creating a museum-wide culture of access and inclusion. Building on past success, the Play For All team made a commitment to provide further trainings led directly by people with disabilities.

One of CCM's first partners, Open Doors Organization, presented a workshop that included an overview of the history of the ADA and general disability awareness, followed by a panel session. The panel included five people with various physical and intellectual disabilities who shared their own personal stories and

experiences. The session provided museum staff with the chance to ask questions of the panel in a safe and open environment. The most significant lesson learned from these early trainings was that people with disabilities are people first and foremost. They do not expect everyone to know their needs; they appreciate it when assistance is offered and directives are followed. After these initial trainings, staff members felt that their confidence had grown and they were no longer afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing when interacting with people with disabilities. They had been given the tools they needed to provide excellent customer service to all visitors of whatever levels of ability.

This success led to the implementation of such sessions as regular practice. Currently, Play For All related trainings are offered at least twice a year. Guest-facing staff members participate in all such trainings. Newly hired employees from all departments are required to participate in at least one training. In addition to regularly offering basic disability awareness sessions, the Play For All program has disability-specific trainings, such as autism awareness. Trainings to benefit specific departments occur as well. Universal Design and Universal Design for Learning sessions have been offered to the Exhibit and Education departments, respectively.

While the museum continues to rely on partners and experts in the field to provide more specialized training, members of the Play For All team now feel qualified to offer many of their own basic training sessions for staff. One of the museum's most powerful trainings is a panel session made up of its own staff and volunteers with disabilities. These members of the CCM community share their experiences and reflections with their colleagues for the benefit of everyone's growth. In many cases, the panel members have invisible disabilities,

which their colleagues learn about for the first time. The impact is far-reaching. All staff have noted that they deeply appreciate their co-workers sharing a very personal part of their lives so that everyone might have greater knowledge and sensitivity to people of all abilities.

On-going disability awareness trainings are considered to be one of the keys to the overall success of the Play For All initiative. The importance is recognized by staff in all departments. The trainings have been a vital contributor to a general culture change within Chicago Children's Museum.

THE TEAM

The two-person Play For All team of Golden and Walsh proceeded strategically in the beginning, calling upon various museum departments for additional participation and input. We worked closely with the exhibit department to discuss physical changes to exhibit spaces—changes that had been recommended by the many assessments that had been conducted by individuals with disabilities. The team also held regular meetings with development staff in order to keep them updated on progress, and to assess opportunities for funding. Peter Williams, vice president of Exhibits and Building Operations, joined the team shortly after its start, and served an important role, since many of the physical changes needed in the museum required his input and approval. Having Williams, a senior management-level advocate, on the team to assist with decisions and provide insight proved beneficial. Invitations were extended to other staff members who exhibited a passion for the initiative or whose job responsibilities required regular involvement with the team. A small but powerful cross-departmental team fell into

place. Currently, six core members lead the Play For All team, and an additional six members make up the extended team. The departments of Education, Exhibits, Human Resources, Early Learning, Educator Programs, and Guest Connections are all represented. This group includes staff members with disabilities. Both the core and extended groups meet on a monthly basis; additional meetings are scheduled as needed.

It is important to note that there are no experts on the Play For All team. Each member has a different reason for being involved. The common thread is that the team members share a passion for making the museum accessible and inclusive for all visitors, volunteers, and staff. Everyone on the team is committed to engaging in professional development, accessing literature, and interfacing with community members, in order to grow in their own understanding and to share their knowledge and experience with the wider museum.

THE ACCESS AND INCLUSION POSITION PAPER

As part of the professional development journey, the two founding members of the PFA initiative attended the annual Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability conference in the summer of 2007. LEAD is a group of professionals and organizations brought together through a shared understanding and dedication to the mission of creating accessible cultural arts opportunities for all. At the conference, Golden and Walsh attended a presentation by the San Diego Zoological Society and the Smithsonian Institution about the importance of institutional position papers addressing accessibility. The two of us returned from the conference motivated to move forward with this next step. An accessibility position paper seemed the

This exhibit is called **WaterWays**.

There is water in this exhibit. If I want, I can wear a raincoat.
My hands might get wet. It is OK to get a little bit wet. I can build
a fountain, I can fill the buckets with water, too! I will not climb into
the water. I can just watch if I don't want to get wet.



Photo 3. The two photos reappear in a page from the Storybook Guide: an image composite (with raincoat) relating to the WaterWays exhibit. "It is OK to get a little bit wet," the page says.

perfect way to gain museum-wide “buy-in” and define priorities. The timing was perfect, since the museum was just about to embark on a large position-paper project, covering a number of topics central to its practice. The Play For All team advocated for “access and inclusion” to be one of the first position papers created. Cross-departmental teams were formed to write each of the papers. Peter Williams led the development of the Access and Inclusion paper, and worked with external experts from the field to provide input and review.

In writing the paper, each department’s role within the museum was considered, and recommendations were written for short and long term goals related to access and inclusion. For instance, one of the goals of the Human Resources department was to post all employment opportunities through sources and websites that reach people with disabilities. Today, this goal is carried out during all recruiting efforts. A goal for the Exhibit department was to incorporate a Universal Design assessment into all new exhibit projects. Today, a four-step review process, including Play For All team members as well as external experts, ensures that experiences are inclusive to all visitors.

The Access and Inclusion Position paper begins:

Chicago Children’s Museum is dedicated to creating an inclusive community that embraces people of all abilities. CCM will utilize universal design principles to make its programs and services available to all members of the community (Center for Universal Design 2007). In addition, CCM will aggressively pursue equity and is committed to exceeding compliance with the current Americans with Disabilities Act and Illinois access laws. These laws, the principles of universal design, and the “Play For All” initiative will guide the creation of our exhibits, programs,

activities, facilities, print materials, websites, and multimedia presentations to ensure that, to the greatest extent possible, they are usable, interactive and enjoyed by all.

PARTNERSHIPS

One of the many highlights of the Play For All initiative at CCM has been the success of partnerships with organizations in the disability community. From the beginning, the Play For All team discovered that numerous people in the disability field were excited that the museum was interested in pursuing access and inclusion and were extremely willing to share their expertise. Over time, much has been learned and gained from the relationships. With the help of these partners, CCM has benefited from numerous staff trainings, museum assessments, and new exhibit plan reviews. Partners have also helped in the creation of a variety of resources and tools that are now available to museum visitors. For example, a strong relationship with The Autism Program of Illinois (TAP) led to the development of CCM’s Storybook Guide, often referred to as a Social Story™. The guide describes each of the museum’s interactive exhibits. Reading about and viewing pictures of the exhibits prior to visiting can relieve anxiety, ease transitions, and help children better anticipate the experience. This popular and effective tool, originally developed for children on the autism spectrum, has proven beneficial to all visitors who may have concern and difficulty when visiting new places.

Another useful tool was created through a partnership with the Belle Center of Chicago. The museum worked with two occupational therapists from the Belle Center to create a Therapy Play Guide. Usable by parents, caregivers, and professionals, the guide explores



Photo 4. The Chalk Drawer by Zot Artz™—the boy in the wheelchair is drawing with chalk attached to the front of his chair, creating floor art in the Kraft Artabound studio at Chicago Children’s Museum.

the benefits of play and supports children working on therapies by highlighting opportunities within each exhibit. Both the Storybook Guide and the Therapy Play Guide are available for download on the museum’s website (<http://www.chicagochildrensmuseum.org/index.php/about/accessibility-inclusion>). Copies of the guides can also be checked out, free of charge, at the museum admission desk.

Partnerships to create new materials and tools are ongoing. The museum is currently working with students from Trinity Christian College to devise Activity Cards for the components within each exhibit. The Activity Cards will offer suggestions for parents and caregivers as they support their child’s play within the museum. The project will be prototyped and the finished product will be made available for download with free copies offered at the museum.

A partnership with the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago (RIC) provided the museum with its first disability assessment in 2006. During the assessment, the occupational therapist offered valuable feedback and suggestions as to how the museum could make its public space and exhibits more inclusive and interactive for people with various disabilities. Today, the museum works with RIC in an ongoing way. Occupational, physical, and recreational therapists review new exhibit plans and offer feedback and suggestions. This process helps assure that all CCM visitors, no matter their ability, can comfortably and effectively interact with the exhibits. In exchange for these services, Chicago Children’s Museum offers RIC a variety of opportunities to use the museum for group visits, enabling a unique rehabilitation experience for patients and their families. Partnerships with individual families

with children with disabilities have also served to inform the museum greatly. Through early assessments by families, the museum learned that although most of its exhibit spaces were accessible by people with physical disabilities, including those who use wheelchairs, some specific components of exhibit spaces were unusable by those with limited mobility. Families shared that their children became inactive participants, only able to watch as other children played and experienced the fun. In response, the museum worked to adjust several existing components in the museum to be more accessible, and has designed all new components with the goal of being inclusive to all.

PLAY FOR ALL EVENTS

Play For All events were developed as a direct result of the feedback received from families surveyed during the summer of 2004. These families said that, in addition to wanting the museum's experiences to be generally inclusive, they were also very interested in having time for their children to experience the museum when it was less crowded, and when it was populated by other families with children with disabilities. The museum held its first Play For All event on a Thursday evening in January of 2009. The museum was usually free and open to the public on Thursday evenings, but the PFA team chose a relatively low-visitation month to allow the families a quieter experience. Some adaptations were made to the museum for the evening event. A sensory quiet room was created in one of the museum's workshop spaces. Low lighting in the form of rope lights was used to make a more comforting, softly lit environment; bean bag chairs, soft rugs, books, sensory balls, and toys were also added. The quiet room provided a respite to families who needed to get away from the hustle and bustle of the museum. A kines-

thetic action space with giant balls, music, and parachute play was also constructed in one of the museum's exhibit areas to accommodate children who were interested in gross motor play. All of the extra activities and spaces were facilitated by museum staff or volunteers throughout the evening.

Activities in the museum's art studio were adjusted to reflect a more adaptable sensory experience. The Play For All team acquired a large Chalk Drawer that was introduced at the event. Designed by Zot Artz[®], the adaptable tool allowed all children, including those in wheelchairs, to create giant chalk drawings on the studio floor. Other activities offered options such as finger painting and sand play.

The first Play For All event included families from partnering organizations. Bus transportation was provided free of charge to the groups. Children with physical and intellectual disabilities and their families attended. Short surveys were passed around at the event and additional staff members were on hand to conduct the inquiries. Both adults and children had the opportunity to share feedback. Comments and suggestions were used by the Play For All team to structure future events. The museum received positive feedback from many participants in the event. "Your effort to make the museum open to kids of all abilities was most evident," wrote Sarah Paweni, director of the National Lekotek Center. "Your staff was most accommodating and really made everyone feel welcome. We look forward to continued collaborations."

THE INITIATIVE GROWS

Shortly after the first event, the Play For All team presented an update to the CCM Management Committee and Board of Directors. It was an opportunity for the team to share

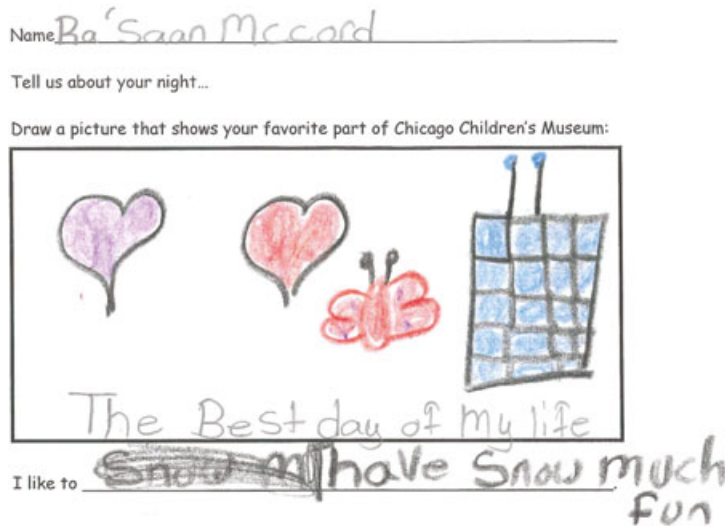


Photo 5. The Child's Survey from the first Play For All event: "The best day of my life," a young participant writes. "I have snow much fun."

the great strides that had been made over the course of five years. The presentations provided an opportunity for the team to request approval to move forward with additional goals and aspirations. Monthly Play For All events were a top priority. Both the Management Committee and the Board recognized that success had occurred despite very limited resources, and gave approval for a dedicated budget to be assigned to the Play For All initiative. While still modest, the budget would allow for monthly events, and would support ongoing professional development For staff and partnership building. The team enthusiastically moved forward with its work.

ONGOING PLAY FOR ALL EVENTS

Play For All events were scheduled for the second Saturday of every month, a practice that continues today. The museum opens one hour early to pre-registered families and groups. Free admission is offered to the first

100 registrants (limit six per family) and bus transportation and free admission are provided to invited groups who work with children or caregivers with disabilities. Participation is capped at 200 people to guarantee a quiet hour in the museum.

Pre-registration continues to be a requirement for event participation. Interested parties can register online or can call a Play For All hotline. The online registration option has seen greater usage. While registration has grown, the number of those who actually attend the events has remained relatively stable. Families have explained that they never know what a morning will bring, and sometimes, while fully intending to visit the museum, their plans change according to the needs of their child. The museum is sensitive to this concern for flexibility. Families who attend the museum during Play For All events enjoy the typical museum experience that all visitors enjoy. Occasionally, special performances or activities are planned during Play For All events, but usually participants simply

explore the vibrant environment of the museum during these quieter and less crowded conditions.

An improved quiet room serves as a regular feature of Play For All events, and now includes many items typically found in therapy settings. A bubble column and cuddle swing, as well as weighted blankets, lap pads, and a variety of vibrating stuffed animals, welcome visitors who may need to relax. A soothing, revolving image projects on one wall, and dim lighting helps create a calming environment in the space. A “cave” (a largely enclosed umbrella-like structure) provides a relaxing escape for those who are overstimulated or just need some quiet time. Many families have become Play For All event regulars and attend several events per year. Some find that the first hour of the day is the only time their children are at ease in the museum and they leave promptly at 10:00 a.m. when the museum opens to the public. Other families have become very comfortable with CCM after experiencing one or two Play For All events and visit the museum during regular hours of operation.

SUCCESSSES

In addition to the benefits of partnerships, the Access and Inclusion Position Paper, and the monthly events, the Play For All initiative has experienced many successes throughout the years. Winning the Universal Design for Learning Award from the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) in 2009 was especially gratifying. The team was told it would be receiving the award a few weeks prior to the ACM annual conference, where Golden and Walsh were scheduled to present a Play For All related session. It would be the first time the two would be sharing initiative information with museum colleagues on a national level. This recognition

confirmed that the Play For All team was on the right track and solidified the museum’s commitment to access and inclusion. Golden and Walsh sat proudly in the audience as the president of Chicago Children’s Museum accepted the award during the conference. We were honored to present the initiative to other children’s museum colleagues who wanted to learn more about implementing their own access and inclusion practices.

As the initiative expanded, so did the workload. Because all members of the Play For All team held full-time positions at the museum, with various responsibilities, it became difficult to manage the additional demands of Play For All. The museum’s management team recognized this, and in 2010 created a new, full-time position dedicated specifically to Play For All. Walsh became manager of Guest Access and Inclusion and today leads the cross-departmental team and provides oversight of the initiative. Responsibilities of this position include managing the growth of new policies, programs, and partnerships.

Another success of the initiative—which contributed to a culture shift within the museum toward greater access and inclusion—was the new intent to recruit and hire staff members with disabilities. Through a partnership with “Bridges... from school to work,” a program of the Marriott Foundation, the museum has hired numerous staff since 2005. Two staff members from the Bridges program went on to win the organization’s Student of the Year award, based on their successful employment at Chicago Children’s Museum. The museum itself received the Small Business Award from Bridges for being an outstanding employer of the program’s participants. Walsh was individually recognized by the foundation in 2012 for her outstanding contributions to the program. The most important aspect of the

Bridges partnership, by far, has been the addition of hardworking, dedicated employees. Building off of successes, and continuing the effort to employ people with disabilities, the museum has recently begun relationships with Intersect for Abilities and JVS Chicago, two organizations that work with adults ages 18 through 70 with disabilities and assist them in finding employment.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY

The commitment to access and inclusion is stronger than ever at Chicago Children's Museum. The Play For All team continues to grow its knowledge and build partnerships with organizations and individuals who aid in the process, contribute expertise, and support the continued expansion of the initiative. Team members have worked to share their experience with the broader field of cultural institutions, and have presented at a variety of national conferences, including Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability, National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the American Occupational Therapy Association. While there is plenty of work ahead, the museum is proud of the great strides that have been made thus far, and the recognition it has garnered among peer institutions as an "expert through experience." The work continues, led by the dedication of passionate staff members, and an institutional desire to make a difference in the lives of all visitors. **END**