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Children's Museums reinterpret play

By Carol E. Scott



The Children's Museum

The Construction Zone is one of the exhibits that will be in The Children's Museum at Heritage Green in Greenville.

As if parenting is not already hard enough, recently there has been a renewed concern and controversy about how our children should spend their free time. Do today's kids know how to play? Do they need more structure?

On the one side, the Society of Research in Child Development (SRCD) reports ("The Benefits of Busy," Newsweek, Oct. 2, 2006) that the more kids are involved in structured after-school and enrichment activities, the better kids perform on measures of educational achievement and psychological adjustment. In contrast, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends ("Clinical Report on Play," Oct. 9, 2006) unscheduled family time and free, child-centered play to build creativity and emotional resiliency in children.

As a child, I remember the carefree days when kids rode their bikes throughout the neighborhood, struck up a game of baseball in someone's backyard, built forts in the nearby woods and played for hours. But now, more than ever, parents are concerned about how children make "good use" of their free time.

Many kids prefer to spend time on the Internet or playing video games. More parents, however, are aware that the first years of life are essential to future learning and want to make the most of their child's time. More families feel pressure to prepare their children for such competitive pursuits as preschool, private school or college admissions process. Additionally, many families believe that unsupervised outside play just isn't safe anymore.

On the upside, there are more educational resources available to children and families than ever. Take for example, children's museums. In 1975, there were approximately 38 children's museums in the United States, with 80 more opening between 1976 and 1990. When The Children's Museum of the Upstate opens this summer, we will join more than 350 children's museums across the country.

Children's museums have successfully reinterpreted play for today's families. We build upon the best of traditional approaches to play — child-centered, hands-on exploration for the whole family. We offer services such as a Middle School Leadership Initiative, teacher training and parent education classes. We also provide recommendations on how parents and caregivers can be

GUEST COLUMN



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play mentors at the museum and in everyday situations — as well as tips on when it's best to step back and just watch the children play.

We exist to provide families with a healthy and nurturing environment of stimulating programs, engaging exhibits and pure fun. Our museum's mission is to ignite a

See SCOTT on page 2B

programs but...

SCOTT

FROM PAGE 1B

passion for learning — empowering all children to discover their full potential and expand their view of themselves and the world.

For many families, visiting a children's museum is a chance to get away from household distractions, perhaps to join with friends, and to spend quality family time. When grownups and children enter our museum, they leave the adult-centric world behind and step into a place designed with the child in mind — a place where a child can explore many possibilities and truly believe "I can be ANYTHING!" We have taken great care to design every element of our museum for visitors of any age or any ability.

One of the best outcomes from the current research is that the concept of play — structured and unstructured — is receiving national attention. For many years, play has been taken for granted as something that just happens and something that is separate from learning.

The Children's Museum of the Upstate believes that play is an invaluable medium for developmental and emotional learning. We celebrate the fact that we will offer the opportunity for peer, family and community interaction, creative expression and discovery in a safe, nurturing environment. And, it's just around the corner.

As the late Fred Rogers said, "Play is the real work of childhood." The Children's Museum of the Upstate couldn't agree more.