



WonderTrek

CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

Center for Play and Interactive Learning Framework

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Framework Context

The Center for Play and Interactive Learning (CPIL) at WonderTrek Children’s Museum is a multi-dimensional resource for play, experience development, hands-on learning materials, and workshops that serve museum staff, volunteers, teachers and education leaders, from the early years through middle school from across the region.

The Center advances the Museum’s vision of:

A more vibrant and connected region because all children enjoy the support of relationships, expanding opportunities, and the wellbeing they need to thrive.

Planning for a children’s museum in North Central Minnesota began in late 2015. A group from Region 5 began exploring the potential of a valued regional asset to serve children, families across Cass, Crow Wing, Wadena, Morrison and Todd Counties. In 2018, a planning team worked with museum planners to develop a Museum Strategic Master Plan (MSMP). Along with a Strategic Framework, Exhibit Concepts, and Action Plan, the MSMP included a Learning Framework that consolidated the Museum’s beliefs and intentions about play, learning, learners, and the museum’s learning experiences. That Framework is the guiding document for the Center for Play and Interactive Learning.

Inspired by the critical role of play and learning in children’s life-long trajectories, the Center enhances the museum’s dynamic material-rich environments, exhibits, events, and programs by exploring and deepening its understanding of play and training museum staff and volunteers. In a very real sense, the Center serves an essential R&D function for the Museum’s play, exploration, and learning experiences expressed in its mission:

To bring together the region’s children and families in shared experiences that are grounded locally and open to the wider world. Dynamic, material-rich environments, exhibits, events, and programs engage children in the joy of play and the wonder of learning.

The Center’s **Purpose Statement** identifies the broad ways in which it actively supports the Museum in accomplishing its vision and mission and serves its audiences.

The Center for Play and Interactive Learning values play as a powerful strategy for learning and wellbeing. Play is a way for children—and adults—to explore, engage with, and understand their world. Interactive learning is a related process for exploration and learning. The Center highlights the role of interaction with objects and materials, with people, ideas, and the physical environment in both play and interactive learning in informal and formal learning settings.

CPIL supports two complementary interests. First, it is intent on deepening its understanding of play through on-going inquiry, small experiments, and

projects that explore the conditions that engage children and boost play value. At the same time, it is committed to supporting and building capacity in adults who work directly and indirectly with children birth – 8 years of all abilities and backgrounds in formal and informal learning settings around play and interactive learning.

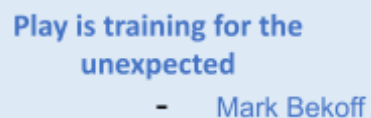
The Center for Play and Interactive Learning is committed to changing the way the region sees and values play in the lives of its children.

The following is intended to clarify and distinguish these two important processes, play and interactive learning in the context of the CPIL purpose.

Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated, and an enjoyable way in which children and adults explore and learn, using their bodies, minds, and imaginations. Play does not serve external agendas or goals, but is a subjective experience that only the individual decides whether it was successful. A natural learning strategy, children develop their interests, capabilities, and lifelong skills through play.

Interactive Learning is active engagement with others, objects and materials, and features of the physical environment using the senses, feelings, conversation, and the whole body. It draws on and develops skills and understandings to make meaningful connections. Choices are often determined by adults and may be guided. Interactive learning can be playful.

The Center's Audience



**Play is training for the
unexpected**
- Mark Bekoff

The Museum welcomes people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities living in or visiting Region 5. It actively seeks to serve children 12 years and under, in multi-generational families and groups, and early years and learning professionals and middle school teachers (Appendix: MSMP).

Reflecting the Center's purpose, CPIL's target audience is adults with a high interest in children's play and interactive learning. Within this group of adults are smaller clusters with similar and shared interests around play and interactive learning that are salient to how the Center engages them and what it offers. These shared interests might include the adult's role and relationship to children; the nature of their interest in play; the settings in which they interact with children, their availability, etc.

These shared interests help define five audience clusters that the Center is particularly interested in serving. Described below, each cluster is linked to the important ways they encourage, support, and facilitate children’s play and interactive learning during childhood.

- Museum staff and volunteers. First and foremost, the Center serves an internal audience of museum staff and volunteers who are responsible for developing, designing, facilitating, and evaluating museum experiences including exhibits, environments, and programs.
- Early years and school-based learning professionals who care for and/or teach children birth – 8 years in group settings. The Center places a high priority on serving in-home and center-based childcare providers; early childhood and elementary teachers in public, private, and tribal schools who are in a position to expand play experiences in their settings.
- Friends and family who raise, care for, or homeschool children birth – 8 years. The Center recognizes the vital role that parents, guardians, family members and friends play in letting play happen in home settings and in everyday moments.
- Administrators of early childhood and elementary level programs and schools. Understanding the value of play and interactive learning for young children is critical for leaders in public, private, or tribal schools or early years programs to support these experiences in programs and classrooms.
- Educators and youth group leaders serving children and youth 8 – 12 years in out-of-school programs such as Scouts, YMCA, community centers, etc. The Center believes it can provide valuable support to these educators and group leaders in developing and facilitating play and interactive learning experiences in their programs and settings.

The Center also welcomes the participation of others interested in supporting children’s open-ended play and interactive learning including staff at other children’s museums,

Approach to Play and Interactive Learning

The Center will reflect the Museum’s role and value as an informal learning setting, one that complements and supports schools, encourages learning throughout the life-span, and connects learners across the region. Informal learning settings are characterized by exploration, learning, and discovery that is:

- Learner directed
- Social and occurring through interactions with others
- Object-centered and experience based
- Contextualized and embedded in a specific setting or place
- Active

The Museum's set of Learning Experience Platforms share five Engagement Strategies summarized below that are relevant to informal learning settings, reflect the Museum's view of play and learning, and are capable of engaging a wide range of audiences in varied ways and settings. At the Center, these strategies are tailored to its purpose, to the interests of audience clusters, and their roles in creating and supporting play and interactive learning experiences.

- Play is at the heart of the Center's purpose, activities, and experiences. Emerging early in life, play changes with development. It exists across cultures while being viewed differently by different cultures. As an engagement strategy for CPIL, Play is valued across all domains and supported in its many expressions including make-believe, moving, building, talking, and problem solving. Play is provided for in settings where children spend time: museums, at home, school, care, and in nature.
- Conversation involves speaking, listening, and gesturing that build connections among children, families, friends, and neighbors. It invites an exchange of ideas; develops shared understanding; and can create on-going dialogue across the region. As an engagement strategy for CPIL, Conversation creates conditions for talk during play, extends discussion, and enriches spaces with words and language. Conversation also involves staff and volunteers engaging through questions, sharing information, and scaffolding.
- Materials Exploration inspires play, taps objects' symbolic potential, and sparks investigations of the material world. As one of CPIL's engagement strategy, Materials Exploration presents a rich variety of materials—natural, raw, human-made, found, familiar, and novel—in interesting ways and contexts. It encourages messing around with materials as well as focused inquiries that invite observation, provoke new questions, and lead to new ideas.
- Place-based Contexts enrich experiences, open up to new places, invite placemaking, and forge connections to home and the region. As an engagement strategy for CPIL, Place-based Contexts draw on relevant and intriguing clues about time, space, and belonging. It brings in local materials and local references, shared stories, regional touchstones, and varied perspectives for inspiration, as a backdrop and an invitation to explore physically and through the imagination.
- Digital Media extends the reach of the Center by connecting people and places across the region, the state, and the world. It expands and complements the range of low- and high-tech activities that CPIL offers. As an engagement strategy for CPIL, Digital Media makes play and interactive learning available at multiple locations; assists with evaluation and documentation; allows staff, volunteers, parents, teachers, and care providers to revisit and reflect on practices and previous experiences; and helps create a record of ideas and accomplishments.

Focus Areas

Play and Interactive Learning are the Center's two primary areas of interest. These are areas in which it will be most active in creating experiences, developing expertise, channeling resources, and establishing a regional profile.

Consistent with the Museum's View of Learning (Appendix: MSMP), these two CPIL Focus Areas share significant characteristics. They are both active processes involving the senses, emotions, mind, language, and body. They involve the child's or adult's direct experience and engagement with people, objects, the physical environment, and ideas. Both play and interactive learning cross developmental domains (social, emotional, physical, and cognitive), change with development, are shaped by culture and the environment, and may involve adults.

While connected, play and interactive learning are distinct processes that support learning. They often appear to be simultaneous and seamless with children moving knowingly and unknowingly between the two.

Within the broad, rich territory of these two Focus Areas, the Center has prioritized a set of topics it believes will help in deepening its understanding of Play and Interactive Learning to the advantage of children, parents, teachers, and caregivers by boosting play value and making these experiences more available. These topics may be explored through on-going inquiry and small experiments; discussion and projects across the Museum; and developing and designing environments, experiences, and exhibits. They may be explored by Museum and Center staff; educators, parents, and caregivers.

Aspects of Play of particular interest include:

- Play types considering various views of play: Free play; object, make-believe (dramatic, pretend, fantasy, etc.), construction, nature, symbolic, and games
- Age-related play—across childhood and multi-age
- Cultural aspects of play
- The adult role in play
- Play's benefits to well-being, social-emotional skills, critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication
- Play environments and the conditions that invite, support, and extend play
- The role of place in play: features and qualities relevant to the region in the museum, other informal learning settings, schools, nature, playgrounds
- The role of play objects: loose parts, toys—commercial and found, low and high technology

Aspects of Interactive Learning of particular interest are:

- Distinguishing characteristics of interactive learning: i.e. active, hands-on, learner directed
- Social, physical, cognitive aspects of interactive learning

- Conditions and features (objects, materials, environments etc.) that support interactive learning
- Strategies for interactive learning i.e. messing around
- Technology's role in interactive learning
- Adult strategies for supporting interactive learning

Services, Activities, and Resources

As one of the Museum's Learning Experience Platforms, the Center contributes to the Museum's offerings and its intended impacts (Appendix: MSMP) with a set of services, activities, and resources. Supporting the Center's work, engaging its audience, and filling its schedules, these offerings emerge from the Focus Areas noted on the previous page. They are guided by the Engagement Strategies to assure a coherent, consistent play-based, interactive approach that is in the spirit of play and playfulness. Formats of the services, activities, and resources are flexible, capable of taking place on-site, across the region, or online. The Center's services, activities, and resources cluster into three areas.

Programs, facilitated activities and experiences, will be offered by Museum staff as well as by teachers, parents, early care and learning professionals, and guest presenters. Programs range from one-time workshops to multi-session trainings to summer-long institutes; in-person, at the Center, and on-line. When possible, they will be integrated with professional development opportunities and in-service days. In addition to reflecting Museum priorities, programs will emerge from the interests, needs, and expertise of its audience, partners, or community members. Some program examples include:

- **Workshops** for and by teachers and early years and learning professionals on topics such as: free play, cultural aspects of play, recognizing mature play; materials exploration; nature play, and adult facilitation of play.
- **Training** in facilitating play, the adult role in letting play happen
- **Play institute** for a cohort of teachers focusing on bringing free play into the classroom, setting up a classroom for play
- **Studios** bring participants together in a dedicated workshop space with materials and equipment over an extended time period over weeks or months to work collaboratively on a project. Through inquiry, presentations, and revisions, participants learn with and from one another.
- **Onboarding and training for Museum staff**, volunteers, and board members
- CPIL will also serve as the **site** for related programs sponsored by other organizations such as cultural organizations, the Y, schools, Sourcewell, etc.

Now Playing are pop-up play labs within the Center, in the Museum, and across the region for active play, exploration, and interactive learning. Often developed around a question, they allow the Center and its users to explore the physical and social conditions that support play; engage

more children, families, and teachers in play and interactive learning; and bring a fresh twist to play experiences.

- Material Lab includes loose parts, novel materials and media, props and costumes, and their role in play and learning.
- *Now Playing – On-the-Go*, a mobile option, takes the pop-up play and materials exploration to locations across Region 5 including libraries, schools, festivals, parks, day care centers.
- *Now Playing-Virtual* provides online projects for parents, caregivers, educators, and their children with play-based explorations such as fort-making, mud kitchens, nature play, etc.
- *Now Playing – At Home* scales play time to home settings, including home care, and to family time, with play packs, and on-line invitations to play.

Research and Evaluation reflect the Center’s ongoing interest in exploring and understanding play as a powerful tool for learning. At CPIL, research and evaluation are on-going, integral processes that involve parents, caregivers, and educators as well as Museum educators, designers, and volunteers. Research and evaluation take many forms, from focused investigations on boosting the play value of the museum’s exhibits and programs; to action research in classroom, care, and outdoor settings; to documenting and sharing the work of the Center. CPIL research and evaluation and supporting resources include:

- Evaluation of museum programs and exhibits and their impacts
- WonderTrek’s long-term research agenda around questions similar to *how do children find their place in the world*
- A repository, or archives, video, photos, and examples of children’s work from inquiry projects such as Fall 2020 Playful Explorations.
- A professional library for staff that houses books, videos, journals, and articles that explore current and historic perspectives on play, cultural aspects of play; nature play; interactive learning; early years development; and place. The library is also available to parents, teachers, and care providers on-site and accessible online.

Engaging Partners and Stakeholders

The Museum and the Center serve the region with a specific organizational goal identified in the MSMP, to be:

A recognized regional convener that advances the larger regional agenda around children and the challenges that it faces.

To accomplish this work, the Center will work with a wide range of players and partners including parents, caregivers, educators, organizations, and schools in towns and cities across the Region. Interested in new opportunities, responsive to its partners and supporters, open to

innovative use of its resources, and interested in learning from others, the Center serves as a multi-dimensional resource in a variety of roles around play and interactive learning.

(I changed the order)

- As a Connector, the Center networks around shared interests, linking people, ideas, assets, and organizations with related expertise and shared priority.
- As a Convener, the Center brings together multiple parties around a shared interest such as play in the everyday life of the child, the adult role in children’s play, or rethinking the presence of play in classrooms and public spaces.
- As a Collaborator, the Center actively works with partners to address more complex problems and challenges or create something new together. Often working with multiple partners, the Center will contribute expertise, resources, and goodwill.
- As a Container, the Center makes physical space available, serving as a host site for other organizations and individuals and their related programs or events.
- The Center plays a key role as a Catalyst, promoting change around play and interactive learning by expanding awareness, exploring new ideas, engaging varied perspectives, and mobilizing for action.

Center Goals

A set of Goals serve a key function in shifting from capturing the core elements of the Framework to activating it. The Goals provide long-term guidance for the Center in serving the Museum, advancing its interests, and giving direction to its continuing development and operations. Moving forward, the Goals will be supported by objectives and an action plan. The Center intends to:

1. Develop a rich, shared, evolving understanding around play and interactive learning that reflects and serves the Museum’s vision and mission.

This goal is about articulating key aspects of play and its relation to interactive learning; exploring conditions that support and extend these processes; and being intentional in investigating, documenting, and sharing questions about them.

2. Infuse the Museum’s environments, exhibits, programs, and activities with high play value and playfulness.

This goal is about the Museum finding innovative ways to showcase its expertise and distinctive approach to play and interactive learning across its offerings: boosting play value, celebrating play, showcasing play environments.

3. Provide leadership and advocacy for making the value of play and interactive learning accessible and visible to children, parents, caregivers, educators, and decision makers across settings in the region.

This goal is about building awareness of play and interactive learning with partners and stakeholders; integrating play and interactive learning into the regional infrastructure for wellbeing and learning from birth, across the life span; and being an advocate and regional expert on play.

4. Support adults in encouraging and facilitating children's play and interactive learning.

This goal is about understanding the role of adults in letting play happen and developing effective methods for engaging adults in facilitating play and interactive learning.

Moving Forward

The Center for Play and Interactive Learning Framework is a tool that can and should be used widely, referred to often, and be well-integrated into the Museum's and the Center's mindset. Becoming such a tool takes time, commitment, and a set of starting points. Three starting points for the Center follow.

Integrate the Framework with Capital Project Planning: From facility planning, to ~~early~~ exhibit ~~concept~~ development, to fundraising, the Center is integral to creating a dynamic, robust regional asset. Areas for coordination include, but are not limited to the following.

- Flow planning for the Center into the Capital Project Timeline around site master planning, the building program and design.
- Bring the Center into developing the Museum's organizational structure, areas of responsibility, the relationship between exhibits, programs, and the Center; incorporate into position descriptions.
- Plan for bringing the Center's services, activities and resources on line: confirm, prioritize, and lay the foundation to start growing the services, activities and resources.
- Identify and address operational issues such as Center hours, use of the Center when the museum is closed, optimizing use of the space, ~~shared spaces~~, a CPIL membership, etc.

Foster Awareness: Familiarize key players—board, staff, volunteers, and partners—with the Center and the driving ideas of the Framework.

- Review the Framework with board members.
- Share the Framework with stakeholders, highlighting ways in which they might engage.
- Identify partners critical to advancing the Center’s interests and cultivate those relationships.
- Research the nature of interest, gaps, and resources for play and interactive learning regionally.
- Begin development of a communications plan about the Center, its purpose and what distinguishes it from play resources and experiences that are encouraged and supported by regional groups serving a similar audience and a related purpose.

Build Internal Capacity: Probe the Framework to deepen familiarity with it and its component parts. Find opportunities to put the CPIL Framework to work; build in time for discussion, reflection, and new action.

- Begin work on developing a shared language around play and interactive learning for the Center. Develop working definitions for play and interactive learning; clarify the types of play (object, make-believe, large motor play, etc.) of greater relevance; articulate a set of beliefs about play and interactive learning.
- Develop objectives and action steps for the Center’s Goals.
- Articulate how the processes of the Center and those for exhibit, experience, and program planning intersect and work together.
- Launch the Resource Library with a selection of key articles to share internally; identify shared resources and touchstone documents.
- Develop practices and methods such as a *play autobiography* that builds awareness around play experiences and generates new insights into play.
- Begin a search of play training resources and practices for developing a reliable model around CPIL’s distinct approach to encouraging and supporting play.
- Initiate an annual practice of framing questions around play and interactive learning to guide the Center’s work over the next year.

Appendix

References to the Museum Strategic Master Plan

View of Learning (MSMP, p. 7)

An active, lifelong process directed by the learner. Motivated by curiosity and interests, learning engages the senses, emotions, and mind. Learning takes place over time through interactions with others and the physical environment, builds on experience, and creates new meaning.

Learning Experience Platforms (MSMP, p. 15)

Learning Experience Platforms are large-scale learning assets that advance the museum's long-term strategic and learning interests and distinguish it from other organizations. These resources allow the museum to be attractive to and serve a diverse audience, be sustainable, and have a meaningful impact on the Region's challenges and priorities. While defined as separate platforms, distinctions between Learning Experience Platforms are not always marked. Platforms can overlap as they do when activity carts are used for a demonstration in an exhibit.

- Exhibits and Environments
- Programs and Events
- Studio/Maker Spaces
- Parent and Caregiver Resource Hub
- Mobile Unit
- Teachers' Center for Interactive Learning
- Initiatives

Audience (MSMP, p. 5)

The children's museum welcomes people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities living in or visiting Region 5. To achieve its mission, the children's museum must deliberately serve:

- Children 12 years and under with a high priority on children 2 through 6 years
- Multi-generational families and groups
- Early care and learning professionals, elementary and middle school educators

This audience is comprised of a Core Audience, a Secondary Audience, and an Emerging Audience group.

The children's museum's Core Audience is:

- Children 2 – 10 years
- Multi-aged and multi-generational families
- School groups
- *Living in Region 5*

The museum's Secondary Audience is:

- Children, birth through 2 years
- Children and youth, 10 – 12 years
- Community and school groups
- Early care and learning professionals, elementary and middle school teachers
- *Visiting Region 5*

The Emerging Audience is:

- Youth 13 years and up in targeted experiences
- Low-income families
- Retirees
- Non-traditional museum audiences including the Leech Lake Band and the Amish
- *Living in counties surrounding Region 5*

Four C's / 21st Century Skills (MSMP, p. 17)

- Critical Thinking
- Collaboration
- Communication
- Creativity

Impact Areas (MSMP, p. 17)

Children and youth who are *thriving*

Families that are *strong*

Educators and Care Providers who are *prepared and supported*

A museum that is *community owned*

A Region that is *connected across counties, cities, and towns*

Resources and References

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