

A large, hollowed-out tree trunk, possibly a snag, serves as a climbing structure. A young child in a red and black hockey jersey with the number 28 is seen from behind, reaching up to touch the inner wall of the hollow. The wood is weathered and has various carvings or markings on its surface. The scene is set outdoors with green foliage visible through the opening of the hollow.

CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF SOUTHERN MINNESOTA

EXPANSION MASTER PLAN

October 2022

Jim Roe Museum Planning
Vergeront Museum Planning

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW	3
Three Priorities for Expansion	4
STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK	7
Vision	
Mission	
Commitments	
Audiences	
Expansion Goals and Objectives	
PLAY AND LEARNING FRAMEWORK	14
Organizational and Framework context	15
Museum Vision	
Museum Mission	
Audience	
Research and conceptual foundations	16
View of Play and Learning	
View of Museum Learners	
Principles of Play and Learning	
Foundational Experiences	
Elements of play & learning experiences	22
Experience Platforms	
Cornerstones	
Engagement Strategies	
Life-long Assets	
Experience Goals	
Impacts	
GETTING STARTED	35
Implementation Themes and Steps	36
APPENDIX	41
Planning Participants	
Community Backdrop	
Frequently Asked Questions	



CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW



Less than 20 years ago, the idea for a regional children's museum in Mankato was just beginning to take shape. In a relatively short span of time, community interest grew into genuine support and commitment. From the start, the organization held itself up as a "catalyst for building a stronger, more vibrant community around play, so that all children in our region share in a bright future of opportunity and well-being." It was a bold undertaking then—no less so today.

During those early years the Children's Museum of Southern Minnesota (CMSM) dedicated itself to disciplined planning and experimentation. Guided by a Learning Experience Master Plan, staff and board members moved forward with clear intention, opening temporary venues while developing new gallery concepts that promised to delight children and become memorable places in their communities. When the Museum opened at its current location on Lamm Street in Mankato in 2015, families from across the region quickly embraced the idea of a children's museum of their own, built just for them.

Now, as the Museum begins a major expansion, the time is right to reinforce the strategic foundations of the organization and consolidate its ideas around children's play and learning. By combining a Strategic Framework with a Play and Learning Framework, this Expansion Master Plan fulfills both of these planning objectives.

CMSM is now an established community asset and a valued destination for play and learning. With this new role in the community comes different expectations of the Museum. How can it work more deeply with other organizations to bring about a brighter future for the region's children? How can it be a leader in areas where other organizations don't have the capacity or expertise? How can it be more inclusive and serve children of all abilities and backgrounds?

THREE PRIORITIES FOR EXPANSION

In the run-up to its comprehensive campaign, CMSM put forward three priorities: a new year-round, outdoor destination for nature play; an expanded range of sensory-sensitive experiences for children of all abilities; and a sustained, long-term commitment to the power of play. These priorities closely parallel the the expansion goals that emerged from this planning process:

1. Expand and deepen the community's tangible commitment to year-round nature play in children's lives.
2. Promote equitable access to sensory exploration and nature play for children with a wide range of abilities.
3. Firmly establish itself as a recognized regional leader and advocate around the power of play for all children regardless of backgrounds and abilities.



As reflected in the **Strategic Framework**, these goals rest within the Museum's long-term strategic context and will lead to a more complex organization and result in a higher profile for the Museum. In support of these new initiatives, the **Play and Learning Framework** provides a shared understanding across the Museum about the play and learning experiences it creates for its audiences.

CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW

Together, these two frameworks clearly articulate why CMSM provides the fun and enriching experiences it does and will guide it in generating new possibilities for children, families, and the community.

These planning results were achieved through a collaborative process facilitated by museum planners and a team of board, staff, and community members. The process began with a review of existing documents, including the 2011 *Learning Experience Master Plan*, which guided the Museum through its first years of operation. Many elements of that early plan have been carried forward into this Expansion Master Plan. Planning was also informed by conversations with individuals from the community who know the Museum and its plans for the future. A summary of these conversations, titled Community Backdrop, is available in the Appendix.

The Expansion Master Plan provides the Museum with bright prospects for serving the children, families, and communities of Southern Minnesota more fully over the next decade.



STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

This Framework focuses on the Museum's driving principles, its audiences, and its planned expansion. It describes three major projects and their supporting goals to bring clarity to where the Museum believes it can advance its Vision, Mission, and Commitments to benefit children, families, and the community over the next decade.

MUSEUM VISION

The change the Museum seeks

A catalyst for building a stronger, more vibrant community around play so that all children in our region can have a bright future of opportunity and well-being.

MUSEUM MISSION

What the Museum does to contribute to this change

Ignite the natural curiosity of every child through the power of play in awe-inspiring environments indoors and out.

COMMITMENTS

How the Museum understands the connection between its Vision and Mission

In recognizing the Power of Play, the Museum commits itself to connecting play's contribution with children's future well-being. Embedded in these Commitments are values that guide the Museum's decisions and actions.

1. Play in childhood supports children's exploration of materials, environments, relationships and ideas, broadens the world they know, and the pleasure of **discovery**. Throughout life, this encourages a willingness to try new things, to meet new people, and to consider new ideas.
2. Play in childhood sparks early interests, develops areas of expertise, and inspires future study. These early experiences contribute to children's finding and pursuing what is **meaningful** to them: new knowledge, life-long hobbies, careers.
3. Play in childhood takes children outdoors year-round, develops their comfort and confidence in the natural world. Observing and enjoying nature over the years fosters **an appreciation of the outdoors** and an interest in caring for the land.
4. Play in childhood gets children moving, uses small and large muscles, develops balance and coordination, and feels good. Being **active** throughout the year and over the years builds life-long, healthy patterns.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

5. Play in childhood, directed by the child, supports **agency**, presents new and varied challenges—physical and social—and feelings of accomplishment. A sense of agency builds **confidence**, makes things happen, reveals capabilities, and opens opportunities.
6. Play in childhood involves dealing with setbacks, trying again, revisiting ideas, asking for help, and accepting failure. Play’s many early **social-emotional lessons** promote persistence and grit, resilience, getting along with others, and getting unstuck.
7. Play in childhood reveals what is fascinating, inspires questions, opens possibilities for discovery, and invites problem solving. Keeping **curiosity** alive through childhood and beyond encourages thinking critically, considering alternative perspectives, and learning.
8. Play in childhood builds relationships, invites collaboration, and creates community. This supports working with others, builds **connections** with people, attachment to place, and engagement with community.
9. Play in childhood involves interacting with others, understanding other points of view and **perspectives**, and empathizing with others. Early experiences with children from diverse backgrounds prepares children for living in a rapidly changing and increasingly diverse world.
10. Play in childhood is **fun**, full of laughter, humor, and good times with friends and family. Play also teaches children what can’t otherwise be taught. Throughout life, fun buffers against stress, builds connections with others, and adds enjoyment.



CMSM welcomes people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities.

Children 12 years and under with a high concentration of children 2 through 7 years

Multi-generational families and groups

Caregivers, professionals, and educators

Children and families living or visiting Southern Minnesota and Northern Iowa

AUDIENCES

Who the Museum must serve deliberately to advance its Mission and Vision

In describing its audience, the Museum understands “families” and “teachers” broadly. Families include traditional families, foster families, extended and multi-generational families. Teachers include caregivers, pre-K, elementary and middle school teachers, and para-professionals.

Core Audience. Children and families who are currently served fully by the Museum. Many of these people are members, including Gateway to Play participants.

- Children 2–7 years
- Adults: parents, grandparents, adult caregivers, and educators
- Groups: organized groups including extended families, pre-K through 3rd grade, and homeschoolers
- People living in or visiting the Mankato and North Mankato metro area

Special Focus Audience. Children and families that the Museum engages through partnerships, community and cultural relationships, and special initiatives. This audience is served through targeted experiences, sometimes by special invitation.

- Children: birth–12 years, including children of all abilities and backgrounds, who may be underserved by play experiences, and children from new immigrant families
- Adults: parents, grandparents, ECSE teachers, county social workers
- Groups: multi-generational families, community groups, observational site visits arranged by partner/member organizations
- People living in or visiting Blue Earth, Le Sueur, and Nicollet County

Emerging Audience. Children and families increasing their frequency of visits as awareness of the Museum expands over a wider geographical area and as the Museum increases its appeal to older children.

- Children: birth–2 and 8–12 years
- Adults: parents, grandparents, teachers ECSE teachers, county social workers,
- Groups: organized groups including extended families, pre-K through 3rd grade school groups, and homeschoolers
- People living in or visiting Southern Minnesota and Northern Iowa

EXPANSION GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

These strategic-level Goals focus on the Museum's expansion, each one centered on one of the major projects of the expansion. They are positioned to activate the Museum's Vision and Mission and advance its long-term interests.

As a catalyst for a stronger, more vibrant community around play and well-being, the Museum will:

1. Expand and deepen the community's tangible commitment to year-round nature play in children's lives.

Project: **NATURE PLAYScape**, a year-round, half-acre for outdoor play, is designed with settings that encourage physical movement, free-flowing discovery, and active exploration of natural materials. Every step into the adventure takes children from secure and familiar experiences to more challenging settings that are rough and wild.

Objectives: The Museum will:

- Create an extensive, nature playscape for children's year-round outdoor exploration that serves the Museum's full age range and reflects cultural communities.
- Bring nature-based experiences indoors.
- Forge partnerships to create a regional network of nature-based programs and agencies such as area parks departments.
- Support parents and caregivers to encourage their child's explorations of the outdoors and appropriate risks.

Outcomes: In what ways does this advance the positive changes CMSM hopes to make?

- Children are active, confident explorers, choosing to spend time outdoors and are familiar with the natural world of their region.
- Families spend more time together outdoors, on trails, at parks.
- The Museum is recognized for curiosity-driven nature play opportunities.
- Community-wide, active, outdoor play is viewed as a health and well-being practice.

2. Promote equitable access to sensory exploration and nature play for children with a wide range of abilities.

Project: **SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE** is a suite of inclusive and accessible spaces and services including Sensory Space and Sensing Nature. With both indoor and outdoor experiences, Something for Everyone opens the Museum's doors and expands its offerings to welcome and accommodate children with a wide range of abilities and backgrounds.

Objectives: The Museum will:

- Increase opportunities for children's independent mobility and exploration in Nature Playscape and the Museum's sensory spaces and program offerings such as Sensory hours.
- Partner and collaborate with local organizations, advisors, and researchers to grow access options responsive to barriers experienced by the children and families CMSM hopes to serve.
- Support parents and caregivers in meeting the challenges of parenting.

Outcomes: In what ways does this advance the positive changes CMSM hopes to make?

- Children of all abilities enjoy the benefits of increased access to inclusive play spaces indoors and out.
- CMSM is a visible advocate, with its partners, around play and inclusion in diverse contexts including the Museum and outdoor play.
- Parents see the Museum as a valuable resource for navigating opportunities and challenges of parenting in public.



3. Firmly establish itself as a recognized regional leader and advocate around the power of play for all children regardless of backgrounds and abilities.

Project: **LOOSE PARTS PLAY HUB** is a multi-dimensional resource centered on the play and learning value of materials that can be gathered, moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, taken apart and put back together in unscripted ways for exploration, making, arts, enriching exhibits, and professional development.

Objectives: The Museum will:

- Consolidate and deepen its expertise around curiosity, play, and loose parts.
- Create, evaluate, and improve curiosity-driven, interactive, open-ended experiences grounded in CMSM's Play and Learning Framework.
- Engage the community—parents, educators, partners—in meaningful ways in planning play and learning experiences.
- Develop inventive strategies for exploring and sharing loose parts play with audience groups: children, teachers, parents.

Outcomes: In what ways does this advance the positive changes CMSM hopes to make?

- Children become fluent in the possibilities in materials.
- Families are engaged in gathering, sharing, and using found materials at the Museum, at home, and in the community.
- The Museum is a learning organization, asking questions and following its research agenda about children's play and learning experiences.
- The region sees itself as a more connected, inclusive community around play.



PLAY AND LEARNING FRAMEWORK

The Museum's Play and Learning Framework consolidates its most important ideas and beliefs about the experiences it offers. It identifies those ideas, clarifies what they mean for CMSM, and identifies their function and how they work together.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND FRAMEWORK CONTEXT

MUSEUM VISION

The change the Museum seeks

A catalyst for building a stronger, more vibrant community around play so that all children in our region can have a bright future of opportunity and well-being.

MUSEUM MISSION

What the Museum does to contribute to this change

Ignite the natural curiosity of every child through the power of play in awe-inspiring environments indoors and out.

AUDIENCES

Who the Museum must serve deliberately to advance its Mission and Vision

- Children 12 years and under with a high concentration of children 2 through 7 years
- Multi-generational families and groups
- Early years caregivers, professionals, elementary school educators
- Children and families living or visiting Southern Minnesota and Northern Iowa

RESEARCH AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

A set of conceptual underpinnings based in research, child development, learning sciences, and community wisdom provide the rationale and theoretical groundwork for how the Museum creates its play and learning experiences.

VIEW OF PLAY AND LEARNING

How the Museum views play and learning and how they relate to one another

The Museum believes that children's play is essential to development, learning, and long-term well-being. It values developmentally meaningful experiences that use play to support learning. It uses the following definitions of play and learning and how they relate to one another to inform its child-centered experiences throughout the Museum.

Play is a way that children and adults explore and interact with the world—with the environment, others, materials, imagination, and ideas. It develops interests, builds relationships, and supports life-long skills. Play takes many forms; imaginative, physical, constructive, and social play often occur together. An activity that all children engage in, play is critical to healthy development and well-being. Play is child led, intrinsically motivated, and enjoyable.

Learning is an active, life-long process prompted by curiosity, exploration, and discovery. Multi-sensory and managed by the learner, learning occurs through interaction with people, objects, ideas, and the environment. It is constructed by connecting new and past experiences to create new meaning. With time, learning builds on itself, developing new skills and understandings about the self and the world.

Play and Learning are connected, yet distinct processes. Both play and learning cross developmental domains and both use the senses to investigate and understand the world. While play is an important medium for learning, it also offers pleasure and vitality in the moment of play. Often appearing to be seamless and simultaneous, children move, knowingly and unknowingly, from one to the other.

VIEW OF MUSEUM LEARNERS

How the Museum views its audience as learners

The Museum views its audience—children birth through 12 years, their parents, caregivers, and teachers—as well as its staff and volunteers as learners. While recognizing that learners are diverse in many ways with varied experiences and are uniquely capable, the Museum also believes that learners of every age share meaningful similarities. These are qualities that are relevant to the Museum’s view of play and learning. They guide the Museum in placing children and their adult caregivers at the center of their own learning. In creating and facilitating engaging experiences, the Museum views learners as:

Social—They engage and interact with others, learning with and from them.

Active and engaged—They use their senses, hands, bodies, and minds to move, explore, and follow their interests.

Curious and inquisitive—They observe, wonder, have questions, try things, seek information, and find answers.

Creative and imaginative—They have ideas, think in alternative ways, and see new possibilities in both familiar and novel objects.

Responsive—They are alert to what’s happening, are receptive to invitations, and open to opportunities to explore and meet challenges.



PRINCIPLES OF PLAY AND LEARNING

What we know from theory and research on play and learning in children's development and their impact on well-being

These principles bring together the Commitments and the Museum's View of Play and Learning. Reflecting the Museum's audience and consistent with free-choice, informal learning settings, they provide insights into the importance of play, active exploration, the role of adults, and the nature of learning.

1. Play supports children's exploration of materials, environments, relationships and ideas, broadens the world they know, and the pleasure of discovery.¹
(Environment)
2. Play is an optimal medium for learning. It sparks early interests, develops areas of expertise, and is the foundation for future learning.² **(Cognitive)**
"Out of play comes learning." (Jean Peterson)
3. Children and adults also find natural settings more restorative, reducing cognitive fatigue and enhancing positive effects.³ **(Nature)**
4. Play builds active, healthy bodies. Rough and tumble play facilitates sensorimotor development and increases activity levels.⁴ **(Sensorimotor)**
5. Children are capable, active agents in their own play and learning. They build and test new knowledge by transforming sensory input and previous experience into new knowledge.⁵ **(Self-efficacy)**
6. Non-cognitive, social and emotional qualities, acquired early in life, such as curiosity, motivation, perseverance, optimism, and self-regulation impact children's learning.⁶ **(Emotions)**
7. Sparking children's curiosity is the best way to ensure they will absorb and retain information.⁷ **(Curiosity)**
8. Children play and learn through social interaction. They learn in relationship with others, talking, sharing information, and finding out together.⁸
(Relationships)
9. Appreciating and valuing cultures and identities—others' and one's own—begins with early, inclusive experiences with people from diverse backgrounds.⁹ **(Diversity)**
10. Elements of play—personal choice, full engagement, a playful mindset, enjoyment, and humor—add up to fun.¹⁰ **(Fun)**

References

- 1 Paris, S. and S. Hapgood, 2002. Children learning with objects in informal learning environments. In *Perspectives on object-centered learning in museums* edited by S. Paris. Mahwah, NJ.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- 2 Golinkoff, R.M., Hirsch-Pasek, K, & Singer, D. (2006). Why play=learning: A challenge for parents and educators. In D. Singer, Golinkoff, R.M. & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (Eds.), *Play = Learning: How play motivates and enhances children's cognitive and social-emotional growth*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press
- 3 Kaplan, R. and S. Kaplan. (1989) *The Experience of Nature*. New York: Cambridge University Press (from page 436 Evans, G. "Child Development and the Physical Environment"
- 4 American Academy of Pediatrics. 2006. The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. Retrieved October 6, 2006, from: www.aap.org/pressroom/playFINAL.pdf
- 5 Gopnik, A., A. Meltzoff and P. Kuhl. 1999. *The scientist in the crib: What early learning tells us about the mind*. New York: Harper Collins
- 6 A new framework for assessing the benefits of early education. (September 2004). A working paper by the Committee for Economic Development. April 14, 2005
- 7 Engels, Susan. (2015). *The Hungry Mind: The Origins of Curiosity in Childhood*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- 8 Vygotsky, L. 1978. The role of play in development. In *Mind in society: Development of higher psychological processes*, edited by M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, and E. Souberman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- 9 National association for the Education of Young Children. <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity/principles-of-development>
- 10 Keith, Rachel. (2020). Fun is Not a Four-Letter Word: An Art Museum Case Study. In *Exhibition: A Journal of Museum Exhibition Theory and Practice for Museum Professionals*. Fall 2020. American Alliance of Museums: NAME.

FOUNDATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Experiences all children regardless of age, ability, or background, should enjoy with their families, friends, and peers

There are experiences that all children should enjoy during their childhood that are part of having a solid start in life. Children's museums are well-suited to support and encourage some of these experiences.



In small and large ways, in shaping exhibit experiences, in momentary interactions between staff and children, in the freedom children have to direct their play, in their fascination and delight with intriguing objects, the Museum has opportunities to contribute to these Foundational Experiences. These six Foundational Experiences echo the Commitments and Principles and are presented from the perspective of the child, what they might feel, be able to do, or discover when they have these opportunities.

When children enjoy **supportive relationships**, they:

- Feel accepted and encouraged by people who believe in them
- Observe, share interests and ideas, and learn from others
- Collaborate with others and work at getting along
- Are compassionate, care about, and help others

When children **feel recognized and respected**, they:

- Feel known and valued for who they are
- Experience the environment as safe and secure
- Enjoy having a shared place to be part of a diverse community
- Find and make positive choices and challenges

When children **investigate an expanding world**, they:

- Follow their curiosity, express wonder, and ask questions
- Discover interests and capabilities
- Encounter new perspectives and different ideas
- Take risks, fail, make new mistakes, and persevere
- Construct and reconstruct understandings

When children **explore their creativity**, they:

- See possibilities in familiar and novel objects and materials
- Direct their exploration of ideas and possibilities
- Play with alternatives and express “ah-ha” moments
- Make meaning of their explorations

When children **spend time in nature**, they:

- Observe, follow their senses, move freely, and muck about
- Build confidence and comfort with the outdoors
- Make new connections and get to know the living world
- Connect to the seasons and local traditions

When children **experience well-being**, they:

- Understand feelings, ideas and perspectives
- Feel a sense of joy, beauty, and awe
- Look forward to the future
- Enjoy moving and being physically active

ELEMENTS OF PLAY AND LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Building on the Research and Conceptual Foundations, Elements of Play and Learning Experiences come together to make up the Museum's distinct experiential mix. In the Museum's exhibits, in its programs and special settings, these Elements serve as layers that provide richness, focus, and opportunities.

EXPERIENCE PLATFORMS

Resources the Museum creates to deliver experiences and activities to its audiences

The Museum creates interactive play and learning experiences for its audiences across a variety of experience platforms. Five valued and complementary platforms make distinct contributions to strengthen, enrich, and expand the Museum's offerings. Collectively they provide for all of the Museum's children and families with opportunities and choices to play and learn by:

- Serving the full age range, children 12 years and under, their parents, caregivers and teachers;
- Serving the audience with choices based on interests and availability;
- Connecting and deepening experiences; and
- Extending the Museum's reach.



Exhibits and Environments provide the physical continuity of rich and flexible spaces and places that can be explored again and again. Children and adults can engage in self-directed and facilitated experiences in:

- Interior exhibits and environments
- Outdoor environments
- Changing exhibits



Programs and Events offer relatively flexible experiences facilitated by skilled playworkers, educators, artists, and specialists providing guided access to and exploration of media, tools, objects, and processes. Children and adults enjoy varied, customized experiences, and deeper exploration of subjects through:

- Young Explorers
- Drop-in programs
- Studio programs
- Camps
- Performances
- Professional development for teachers and early years caregivers

Nature Play takes the Museum outdoors year-round. The half-acre nature discovery area changes with the seasons. Wide open with possibilities, this landscape invites full-body movement, child-directed exploration, imaginative play, and guided experiences. Rich in natural materials, hollows and hillocks, tunnels, trails, and waterways, Nature Play offers accessible trails and treehouses.

- River Play
- A Grassy Hill
- Cattail Pond
- Cottonwood Grove



Loose Parts Play Hub centers around a varied, changing, and managed collection of loose parts—unscripted, open-ended, found objects including natural materials, varied media, and tools. Bringing together recycling, creativity, and play, the Hub introduces materials into Museum exhibits and programs. It is a place for collecting loose parts, exploring materials and their properties, creating and constructing with familiar and novel materials, and introducing others to beautiful stuff.

- Materials collected from community partners
- A source for exhibit loose parts exploration
- Displays of beautiful stuff
- Loose parts studio for making and creating
- Professional development sessions
- CMSM Blog
- Research and evaluation



Something for Everyone, a suite of accessible services and spaces supports healthy development for neurodiverse children, their parents and caregivers. Indoor and outdoor experiences welcome children and families to inclusive environments that accommodate individual differences and support those with sensory sensitivities to navigate and customize their Museum visit. These spaces are complemented by programs, events, and a pre-visit on-line guide.

- Special Needs Access Playtime (SNAP), quarterly
- Social Guide for preparing to visit the Museum
- Drop-in Sensory Spaces
- Special Accommodations
- A support site for early childhood special ed teachers to observe students

CORNERSTONES

The territory explored by the Museum in its Experience Platforms

Cornerstones help define the territory from which the Museum will draw subjects and settings to explore in its exhibits and programs. While they connect with school subjects and support school curriculum, they are not defined or limited by subject areas. They reflect the naturally interdisciplinary world of children's curiosity, playful explorations, and social interactions.

The Museum's Cornerstones inspire the dynamic play environments that now distinguish it from other organizations serving a similar audience. Going forward, the Museum will build on its established expertise and audience expectations while entering new territories to expand play and learning opportunities.

Regional and Local—Play settings that feature recognizable, place-specific elements contribute to a sense of familiarity and help make connections within children's expanding worlds. This layer includes nearby landmarks, place names, and landscapes (farms, towns, woods, and prairies). This Cornerstone also holds a place for people who make things—from children at the Museum to local artisans producing works that make up the Museum experience.

Everyday Places and People—As an integral part of the regional community, the Museum experience looks and feels like it belongs among the places—urban and rural—just beyond its doors. In this everyday setting, children play with others they might already know and meet people from their community who are there to help. These attributes keep the Museum connected with Southern Minnesota people and places, and help children keep connected with their own worlds outside the Museum.

Stories Big and Small—These can emerge from play experiences, when a child pieces together a brief narrative from a moment's observation, or are told by a setting intentionally designed with interesting structures and associated loose parts. The big stories that the Museum keeps alive are important to the community beyond its doors. These are enduring stories that hold big ideas and help make sense of events and the passage of time. They can include stories of growing up, life in the river, animals on a farm, or butterflies that like flowers.

The Natural World—Children are in nature everyday but often in ways that are limiting and less than comfortable. When the Museum sets up nature encounters, children’s curiosity and inquisitiveness readily lead to focused observations of plants and animals, sensing and playing with natural materials, and mucking about without parameters. In unscripted, outdoor settings children can move freely and test their physical abilities. Indoors, nature continues to be highly sensory, especially when its out-of-place presence raises questions and prompts free-flowing exploration.



Fascinating Phenomena—When ubiquitous forces of nature—sound, temperature, light, gravity, and moving air—are in the hands of children they become uniquely responsive and terrifically fun. They are easily manipulated, which encourages repeated experiments that lead to understanding. Since these phenomena are all around us, the Museum can design for encounters indoors, outdoors, and through all the seasons. As inherently sensory and scalable phenomena, they can be applied in a range of experiences for children of all ages and abilities.

ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Characteristics of CMSM's distinct approach to play and learning experiences

By intent and design, the Museum counts on these strategies to ignite curiosity and invite play. When selectively brought together in play settings and programs, indoors and out, they are at the core of the Museum's distinct approach to audience engagement. A changing mix of these strategies will be present across all experiences, from everyday interactions with staff to exhibits and programs. While not every strategy can be employed in every experience, each one gives children an additional opening to try something new or try something familiar in a different way.



Unscripted Play—An experience is unscripted when it is set up to be whatever a child is inclined to do with it at that moment. It is open for possibilities. These set-ups have no beginning or end and pose no restrictions on a child's own play narrative.

Loose Parts—Play gets going quickly with objects and materials that are unassigned, freely available, and pleasingly portable. They can be gathered and moved to suit a child's choices and directions and give physical expression to a child's questions and ideas.



Good Questions—Questions are good when they start us wondering. Sometimes the best questions have no clear answer. In the Museum, these questions can come from staff, exhibits, programs, and even wayfinding—“What's Outside?”

Provocation—When something is off-kilter or curiously out of place, it provokes a reaction and sometimes a response. Effective provocations challenge what someone is experiencing and makes further explorations almost irresistible.

Promise of Discovery—Around every corner, under every log, and through every door is something worth finding out about. Not long after their first visit, children come to expect—and trust—that the Museum is filled with things and places to discover.



Multiple Perspectives—Experiencing the world in someone else’s shoes, pretending to run like a horse, or looking down on a scene from high above, are all ways of trying out different perspectives. With each new perspective comes a shift in assumptions and a new line of good questions to explore.

Conversation Prompts—Sharing experiences—immediately and on-the-fly—keeps play going. Responsive play partners (other children, staff, and adult caregivers) provide an audience, sounding boards for ideas, and helpers to be recruited into activities. As an engagement strategy, conversation relies on good proximities, places where it can happen in every experience set-up.

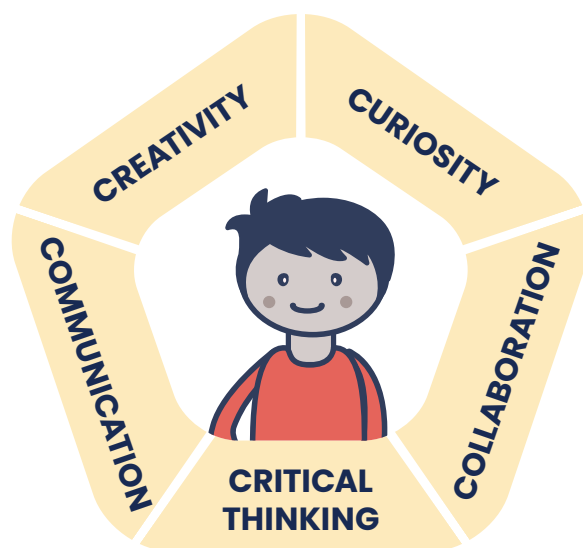
Movement—Stillness seldom attracts attention; movement gets noticed. Movement can be built into an exhibit (a fluttering scarf in a wind tunnel), or something that children push and pull (shaking a rope ladder), or running, lifting, splashing, and rolling (children playing in nature).

LIFE-LONG ASSETS

Qualities, capabilities, and ways of being that the Museum's play and learning experiences support and encourage

In children's everyday moments, in interactions with other children, in using their imaginations and asking questions, children develop and practice life-long skills. These become assets that children draw on throughout their lives to get along with others, to solve small and large problems, to learn, and to find their place in the world. The Museum prioritizes five Life-long Assets in developing and creating experiences and environments.

While there are many ways to build these Assets within and beyond the Museum, the Museum prioritizes creating opportunities that support and encourage children in the following ways.



Curiosity is acting on a natural interest in the world, a feeling of surprise or perplexity. It piques interest, setting in motion a need to find out more. Curiosity is encouraged when children:

- Encounter new sights and sounds, novelty, incongruity, or surprise
- Find ways to find out how things work
- Enjoy a sense of delight at discovery

Collaboration is working together, drawing on individual strengths, sharing knowledge, and co-constructing towards a common goal. Collaboration is encouraged when children:

- Take turns
- Problem solve together
- Share information, ideas, and insights

Communication is being a good listener, taking the listener's perspective, and communicating effectively across multiple forms. Communication is encouraged when children:

- Engage in pretend play, take on roles, make up stories
- Tell or retell a story or sequence of events in one's own words
- Play with words and sounds

Thinking Critically is asking questions, gathering information, evaluating sources and evidence, synthesizing data, and connecting seemingly unrelated facts. Thinking critically is encouraged when children:

- Gather information through their senses
- Observe results
- Make connections

Creativity is wondering, imagining new possibilities, being flexible, and adaptive. Creativity is encouraged when children:

- Wonder and imagine—"what would happen if . . .?"
- Explore and understand familiar objects and materials in new ways
- Revise their ideas and try something new

Life-long Assets are also encouraged when adults—parents, caregivers, teachers, staff:

- Answer children's questions
 - Allow them to work things out among themselves
 - Listen to them respectfully
 - Encourage children to think in new ways
 - Show an interest in their ideas and thinking
-

EXPERIENCE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

What the Museum hopes to accomplish through its play and learning experiences across its Experience Platforms

1. Create irresistible, interactive experiences and environments, indoors and out, that activate children's well-being and learning through play.

Objectives

- Engage children to learn what interests, delights, and fascinates them in developing Museum experiences.
- Provide a varied and dynamic set of offerings that are child-led, curiosity-driven, and rich in loose parts.
- Engage and challenge children's physical, social, cognitive, and creative capabilities and explorations.

Outcomes

- The Museum is recognized as a reliable and accessible source of information on the value of play.
- Children who have enjoyed abundant play opportunities, are excited to learn, and have enjoyed success in a variety of settings.
- The community understands the importance of early play and learning experiences in the lives of children and its own future.



2. Get everyone into the act with play to create an inclusive community around play.

Objectives

- a. Co-construct play experiences with people from diverse backgrounds and communities across the region.
- b. Make it easy for parents and caregivers to observe, extend, and engage with other adults to support their children's play.
- c. Create compelling connections among players through sharing perspectives, thinking together, and accomplishing something together.

Outcomes

- Families play and learn together and with other families.
- The community understands the importance of early play and learning experiences in the lives of children and in its own future.

3. Make play and its value matter to children, parents, teachers, and the community.

Objectives

- a. Develop a research agenda to guide the Museum's study of play and its benefits.
- b. Highlight ways for parents and teachers to discover play's connection to their child's well-being at home, school, and in community activities.
- c. Relate play's benefits to community issues and interests.

Outcomes

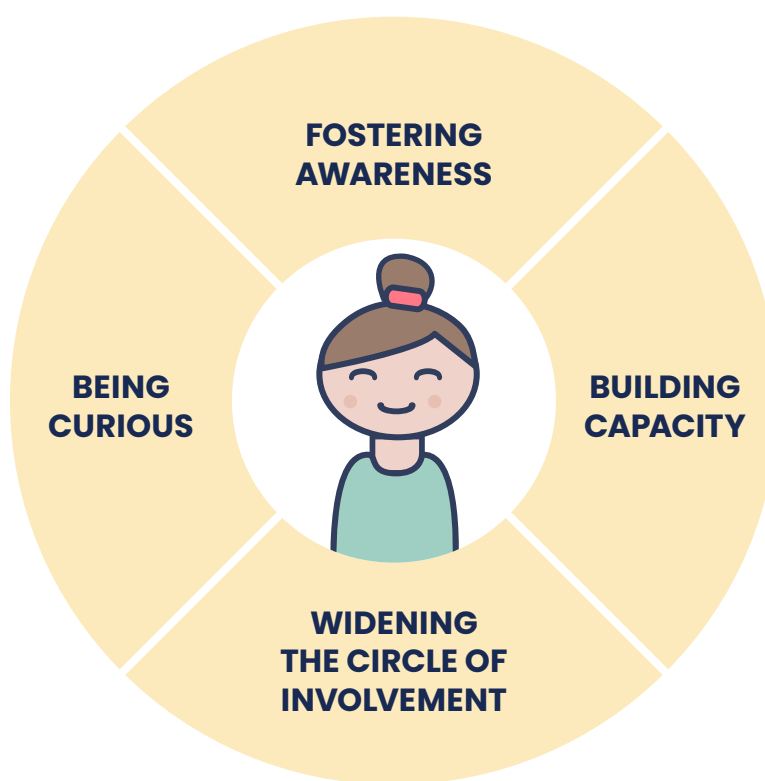
- The Museum is recognized as a reliable and accessible source of information on the value of play.
- Teachers recognize the importance of play in reaching and teaching all children.

GETTING STARTED

IMPLEMENTATION THEMES AND STEPS

CMSM's next steps toward implementation of the Museum Expansion Plan

To transform the intentions of the Expansion Master Plan into realities and achievements, the Museum must take deliberate action across a variety of fronts and at every level of the organization over the next ten years. This work clusters into four themes. The activities that follow are not prescriptive steps, but are suggestions to be adapted and added to based on specific tasks, timeframes, and relevant responsibilities of staff and board.



1. Fostering Awareness. Familiarize Museum staff, volunteers, board, supporters, and partners with the Expansion Master Plan, its Strategic Framework and Play and Learning Framework.

- Build museum-wide understanding of the Expansion Master Plan among all board and all staff. Orient them to the Plan, review it regularly, update as needed.
- Share the Master Plan with community members who contributed to it and with organizational partners.

- Make the connection between the Power of Play and Children’s Future Well-being clear and visible in varied ways—in Museum publications, social media, staff interactions, and grant proposals, etc.
- Reflect the Master Plan in existing systems, processes, and practices—including position descriptions, hiring, on-boarding, staff training, and performance reviews, and board training.
- Use the language of the Master Plan in communicating with board members, donors, in grants, and in the everyday work of the Museum.
- Invite members of the staff and board to serve as advocates for the Master Plan and, as appropriate, for specific parts of the Plan.

a. Strategic Framework

- Develop an action plan for each of the Expansion Goals using the Objectives.
- Incorporate the Plan into organizational and departmental work schedules, procedures, and practices. Coordinate the Plan with the Expansion Project and Capital Campaign.
- Develop metrics for short- and long-term impacts and a dashboard to track and report progress and link them to Expansion metrics.

b. Play and Learning Framework

- Develop an action plan for each of the Experience Goals using the Objectives.
- Use the Play and Learning Framework to guide all aspects of experience development. Adapt it to be a flexible tool capable of assessing exhibits and play environments. Conduct a comprehensive review of exhibits to guide changes, and evaluate new and traveling exhibits using the Framework tool and modify accordingly.
- Incorporate the Framework into departmental work procedures and practices such as exhibit development and design and program planning.
- Let go of programs, activities, and exhibits that are not supported by the Framework.

2. Building Capacity. Deepen expertise around existing areas such as play and curiosity as well as newer areas, such as nature play, inclusive environments, and a more diverse organization.

a. Strategic Framework

- Benefit from lessons learned from colleagues at regional, state, and national nature-play and sensory-adapted environments.
- Develop a shared understanding of challenging concepts such as “acceptable risk.”

b. Play and Learning Framework

- Explore parts of the Framework in greater depth. For instance, talk through the Engagement Strategies and discuss their presence in exhibits.
- When the Museum hires staff or cultivates partners, look for people and groups who support the Framework. Work with them.

3. Widening the Circle of Involvement. Build partnerships and collaborations, involving visitors in planning and inviting new perspectives to broaden involvement in the life of the Museum.

- Find relevant and welcoming ways to communicate with Special and Emerging Audiences, and with children and families the Museum intends to serve more fully.
- Engage parents, caregivers, and community partners in Museum planning, discussions, and projects.
- Form an advisory group for special needs, including parents, special education teachers, researchers, and occupational therapists.
- Identify ways to be welcoming to new audiences: create a sense of belonging, be inclusive, listen and integrate strategies into all aspects of the Museum.
- Reduce and remove barriers to participation in the life of the museum: i.e. increase designated times for children with sensory sensitivities and their families.
- Focus on the adult experience: find ways to engage parents, give adults options for seating near and in exhibits.

4. Being Curious. Ask questions and learn as a museum.

- Grow an organizational culture of curiosity. Operationalize concepts such as “curiosity” and make them visible throughout the organization and the environments. Give staff and board opportunities to play, ask questions, and be learners.
- Ask other children’s museums how they engage community members in planning exhibits and how partners engage their stakeholders.
- Ask children what is fascinating to them: ask what parents and caregivers what they want to know about their children.
- Create and expand opportunities to think together as a staff—through readings, discussions, and research.

a. Play and Learning Framework

- Frame broad questions that emerge from the Framework to serve as a research agenda that can be explored in the Museum’s experiences.
- Adapt items in CMSM’s Exhibit and Program Observation Tool to align with the Play and Learning Framework.



**CURIOSITY
SPARKS
PLAY.**



**LOOSE PARTS
ADD POWER
TO PLAY.**



**MORE PLAY
FOSTERS
FUTURE
WELL-BEING.**



**CHILDREN'S
MUSEUM**
of Southern
Minnesota