

# CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF NORTHERN COLORADO

## CHILDHOOD MATTERS

### A MUSEUM WITH A MISSION

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When I'm asked "Why does Northern Colorado need a children's museum?" my response starts with three words: "[Because childhood matters.](#)" I often then share data and information that most people might know but not deeply. I introduce "The 30 Million Word Gap," research examining language exposure and development based on socio-economic status. By age two language differences are measurable and the impacts for schooling by age five are huge. I compare pictures of children's neurons where the neural density between lower and higher caregiver-engagement is visible. I explain my belief, and science's conclusions, that childhood experiences (particularly early childhood) are directly related to outcomes in adulthood. Some people just like the facts.

But then I tell a story I observed in a local Northern Colorado restaurant. A family of three was seated for dinner. One parent sat next to their child, probably a seven year old. The other parent sat across from them. I noticed two things: 1) the second parent was occupied playing a video game on a smartphone, and 2) no one was talking. I have other stories like this, and you probably do too. It's usually at this point that my conversation partner fully grasps how much childhood matters.

There's lots of child-development lingo I could throw at you: pro-social skills, motor-development, problem solving, creative expression, confidence, trust. But that ends up sounding very clinical, so I'll keep it simple. Early childhood (ages 2 to 8) is very much about experiential and relational learning. It's more about neurons forming a solid, positive foundation than it is about filling an empty vessel with knowledge and information. Children are NOT tiny adults. Childhood is a unique phase of growth and development, and an enriching childhood creates opportunities for social interactions, experimentation, intrinsic motivation and imagination - what we just simply call "[PLAY.](#)"

Yes children will learn stuff if we show or tell them, and some might even learn it by reading. But, [CHILDREN NEED TO PLAY.](#) To quote Fred Rogers, "[PLAY IS THE REAL WORK OF CHILDHOOD.](#)" When children play, they are fully engaging all aspects of their young brains. They are learning social norms, they are learning how to problem solve with peers, they learn trial and error, and they deepen their relationships with their caregivers. Play is essential to functional child development.

Unfortunately, [PLAY IS IN DECLINE](#), which science has also measured. Screens and devices are increasingly replacing time with friends. Organized and structured activities are increasingly prioritized over unstructured activities, which do have value. And policy-maker expectations for high school reading, writing and math proficiency have increasingly pushed their way younger and younger into public education. Today's kindergarten classroom probably does not look like your's did. This is serious, because science has made a direct correlation between [LACK OF PLAY](#) and adult antisocial behaviors, anxiety and depression.

My conversation partner by this point likely asks me, “So what does this have to do with a children’s museum? Isn’t it just a science museum?” And I say, “No. Most certainly no.” A children’s museum’s mission is simple. To elevate play, and all it’s benefits, in a child’s life and in a community. Children don’t learn science in a children’s museum. They **ARE** scientists. They don’t learn about art either. They **ARE** artists. We don’t worry about the facts you read on a sign (there’s probably no signs!). Instead, we create a unique learning moment which might be entirely different the next time you come back. Our exhibits make children experiment, and problem solve, they encourage participation by adults while strengthening bonds, and they create social opportunities between diverse patrons who might not have met ever before. We seek to make a difference in adulthood outcomes by fostering rich childhood experiences.

CMNC’s mission is to **PROMOTE AND ELEVATE PLAY** in Northern Colorado, **BECAUSE CHILDHOOD MATTERS**. A lot. We’ve been working on this since 2015, and we now welcome you on this journey with us!

- *Ryan Howard, CMNC Vice President*