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Obesity and Other Targets of Children's Museums

By **ROBIN POGREBIN**

CHILDREN'S museums do not usually have exhibitions that involve crawling through a giant digestive system.

But such an installation — along with a play center where visitors learn the power of pedaling, bouncing and jumping and a place to meet superpowered vegetable heroes — is part of a larger effort by the Children's Museum of Manhattan to help prevent childhood obesity.

While children's museums are primarily known as activity centers to divert the younger set and to help form future museumgoers, they are increasingly focused on social outreach. "Part of our mission is to provide access," said Andy Ackerman, executive director of the Children's Museum of Manhattan. "Social issues, education, health and creativity — it's all a continuum, and we can connect those domains and reinforce each of them."

The Port Discovery Children's Museum in Baltimore has adapted museum exhibits and programming for children with special needs. The Young at Art Museum in Davie, Fla., has an afterschool arts program for homeless students. The Providence Children's Museum in Rhode Island helps children in foster care find permanent families. And the Children's Museum of the Arts in Manhattan provides a place for foster-care children to reunite with their birth parents by making art together.

"As resources become more and more scarce, everybody's looking to children's museums to fill varying kinds of needs for children and families," said Janet Rice Elman, executive director of the Association of Children's Museums in Arlington, Va. "These are places where families can learn through play — from science to early literacy skills to parenting — in settings that are joyful."

Many of these programs involve collaborations with other organizations that have specific expertise. The Children's Museum of Manhattan on the Upper West Side, for example, developed its so-called EatSleepPlay effort with the National Institutes of Health and collaborates with the City University of New York on training at-home child-care providers in teaching literacy, math and science.

The Children's Museum of the Arts in SoHo has joined with Henry Street Settlement's Urban Family Center to bring free weaving, printmaking and sculpture to children living in transitional housing, culminating with a children's art exhibition and a reception for families and friends. And the Boston Children's Museum is joining with Head Start, Boston Public Schools and the City of Boston to prepare students for kindergarten.

"We want to be relevant to our communities," said Jeri Robinson, the vice president for early childhood and family learning at the Boston museum.

Museums are also developing continuing relationships with outside experts. The Children's Museum of Manhattan, for example, has worked closely with health advisers like Dr. Judith Owens, director of sleep medicine at the Children's National Medical Center in Washington. Her research helped the museum develop the sleep section of the EatSleepPlay exhibition, covering topics like preparing for sleep, what happens during sleep and how much sleep children need.

Rather than serving as just one more recreational option, children's museums are recasting themselves as essential anchors in their communities — "the hub or the center," Mr. Ackerman said.

"Educating through the arts," he added. "That's how you change behavior."

The New-York Historical Society is seeking to educate with its new DiMenna Children's History Museum, which opened last fall. Young visitors learn about prejudice by studying the life story of James McCune Smith, the first African-American to earn a medical degree. They learn about money and credit by visiting the Alexander Hamilton pavilion. "All of the exhibits we've developed are focused on teaching a skill or a behavior," said Louise Mirrer, the president and chief executive.

The museums are also reaching beyond their walls to take their programming more aggressively into underprivileged neighborhoods. The Children's Museum of Manhattan is replicating its exhibitions in East Harlem's public housing. It sends two artists to Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center every week to work with children. And it is running health and literacy programs in the Bronx and New Orleans.

And children's museums are making a concerted effort to draw specific groups of people who might otherwise not come through their doors. On Mondays, the Children's Museum of Manhattan is open to children with autism and their families, as well as to school groups. "They need a quiet venue," Mr. Ackerman said.

The ARTTogether program at the Children's Museum of the Arts brings foster children together with their biological parents to create art, led by a clinically trained, licensed art therapist. The museum recently expanded the effort to include families with children at risk of being placed in foster care. It has hired staff members who speak Mandarin and Cantonese.

"You can come to our space and participate alongside other folks who maybe aren't having the same challenges," said David Kaplan, the museum's executive director. "You want to be supportive of families in the program but you want to be empowering them — you don't want them to rely on you forever. Eventually you

want them coming to the museum on their own terms and on their own time."

In opening a larger space last fall, the Children's Museum of the Arts hopes to generate more revenue to benefit children at risk, to provide a "nice, safe environment for people to come to," Mr. Kaplan said.

Not only are children's museums seeking to educate, they want their visitors to feel comfortable entering cultural institutions for many years to come and to see exhibitions that affirm their own experience. "The audiences who are living here want to be able to come here and see their lives reflected," said Ms. Robinson of the Boston museum.

In some cases, the exhibits also take the visitors to places they have never been. The museum now features a Japanese silk weaver's house that was a gift from Kyoto. "Many of our kids will never go to Japan," Ms. Robinson said. "But they can have an authentic Japanese experience by coming to our house."