



Child's Play

Our Nation's Capital finally has a children's museum—again.

BY ERIN GIFFORD

At the brand-new National Children's Museum in Washington, DC, children are in constant motion, gleefully fluttering between colorful curiosity-inspiring activities. Their parents are, too. Meander through the 30,000-square-foot building on Woodrow Wilson Plaza, and you're likely to spy just as many moms and dads at play as you will see children and toddlers.

On a Whac-a-Mole-style game, visitors test their reaction times while batting at flashing red or blue lights. Elsewhere, in the "Weather Worlds" exhibit, they throw snowballs or shoot lightning bolts from their hands thanks to green-screen technology. The hands-on activities found everywhere in this museum are so wildly engaging and captivating that you may not see a single child or adult head-down on a smartphone, except maybe to snap a few quick photos.

Whether shooting hoops, building race cars or winding up for a home run, the combined museum and science center is more than just gobs of fun for everyone in the family. It's an effortless way to sneak learning into the weekend. Shhh. While children are sinking baskets, for example, they are soaking up Bernoulli's principle as it relates to pressure and velocity. And while they're playing with race tracks and race cars, they're also learning about kinetic and potential energy.



A LONG TIME COMING

The National Children's Museum opened its doors to the public on September 2, 2021, after the 17-year absence of a full-fledged children's museum in Washington, DC. That opening followed a soft launch on February 24, 2020. The museum had been open just 18 days before shuttering due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

This temporary closing was a setback, yes, but one that led to a more robust and multi-faceted programming experience. Over 18 months, museum staff created more than 75 at-home science, technology, engineering, arts and math (STEAM) videos that ranged from how to germinate seeds to how to make fluffy slime.

The team created a monthly podcast, too, called "STEAM Daydream with National Children's Museum." More than a dozen

20-minute programs feature kids interviewing experts on topics such as the science of sports and art as a form of activism. The STEAM-oriented videos and podcasts can be accessed at nationalchildrensmuseum.org/steamwork.

DREAM SPACE

The staff also toiled to enhance and expand the hands-on exhibits, including the museum entrance. Children enter the building by way of a 50-foot-tall slide. Kids twist and turn as they slide down to the lower level (parents take stairs adjacent to the slide). Kids eager for another go can climb back up the rope tunnel to the top of the silver twisty slide. This Dream Machine has two slides, cargo nets and lots of room for kids to scoot and scamper.

"Today's kids need a children's museum like this to inspire them," says Crystal Bowyer, the museum's

president and CEO. "It's so magical. It's filled with things they've never seen before; it opens up their minds."

Engaging exhibits and programs also focus on timely topics of today. For example, the Climate Action Heroes, a group of pint-size eco-friendly superheroes, were developed with the help of climate scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to explore climate change.

A quiz asks questions like "Have you played in the dirt recently?" to match children with a Climate Action Hero. Heroes range from Arbor Avengers, who engage children in the role trees play in the absorption of greenhouse gases, to Water Warriors, who help protect our oceans and keep fresh water clean. Kids learn how to use their eco-superpowers to make positive changes in their homes, schools and communities.



JASON DIXSON PHOTOGRAPHY

LITTLEST LEARNERS

Many children’s museums focus on play- and social-based learning, but the National Children’s Museum is content-based. This emphasis means that even the littlest visitors are introduced to STEAM-based concepts, like naïve physics. This principle, in particular, is explored as infants and toddlers play with light and shadows in the “Little Dreamers” exhibit.

In the “Little Movers” exhibit, children up to age three move their bodies and explore their senses as they amble across the thoughtfully designed space with mirrors, soft blocks and wooden climbers. Children engage with textures, sounds and movement. A weekly STEAM Story Time on Thursday mornings encourages early literacy and playful hands-on activities.

A Mothers Room allows mothers to nurse infants while steps away

from dedicated play spaces for small children. An adjacent quiet space enables children to take a break from the sensory-focused experience. Parents can also check out sensory backpacks with noise-reduction headphones and fidgets

to manage sensory stimulation.

The National Children’s Museum may have been a long time coming, but by the device-free smiles, giggles, romping and frolicking, it’s clear that this museum was well worth the wait.

If You Go

The National Children’s Museum is open Thursday through Saturday and is split into a morning session (9:30 a.m.–12:30 p.m.) and an afternoon session (1:30–4:30 p.m.). Timed tickets can only be purchased online at nationalchildrensmuseum.org/tickets. There is no on-site ticket office, only staff who scan tickets at the entrance, ensuring a largely contactless admissions experience.

To minimize COVID-19 risk, the National Children’s Museum has limited visitor capacity and requires that everyone ages two and up wear a mask. Tickets are \$15.95 and are required for guests ages one and up. Food options are on the way, too. A Bluestone Lane café was set to open in late 2021 with healthy snacks and meals as well as an espresso bar for parents.

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