

# It's All Fun and Games in *Tiny's Diner*

## Preschool Programming in Unusual Exhibit Spaces

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**Abstract** This article describes the challenges of creating educational programs for guided groups that teach about healthy eating, strengthen school readiness skills, include picture book read-alouds, and keep young children engaged, while in exhibit spaces that were meant for free play.

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Kids enter the diner wanting to play;  
How do you teach nutrition this way?  
When a school system pays  
To enhance children's days  
They expect EDUCATION in informal ways.

Welcome to Port Discovery's *Tiny's Diner* where children can be seen doing the chicken dance or putting pickles on their heads. What do these activities have to do with promoting nutrition through early literacy activities? Educators know that young children learn through play,<sup>1</sup> which can include using drama, games, movement, imagination, and music.<sup>2</sup> They respond to humor and enjoy novelty.<sup>3</sup> Add a book as the focal point, and you have Port Discovery's recipe for a healthy program.<sup>4</sup>

When schools choose guided tours instead of opting for free-flow visits, the museum is obligated to provide a formal program worth the extra expense. Creating programs for free-flow areas, such as a diner, can be challenging, however. As soon as children enter enticing exhibit spaces, they immediately want to play. The education department at Port Discovery has worked hard to create a formula that combines formal programming with free play in a fun at-

mosphere where children are engaged and teachers understand the educational value of the program. We aim to impart the message of healthy eating and nutrition while keeping the children's attention and providing a fun experience.<sup>5</sup>

Entering school ready to learn sets a framework for a child's success both in school and in life.<sup>6</sup> Children who enter school "ready to learn" are more likely to graduate from high school, hold down a job, have higher earnings, and commit fewer crimes.<sup>7</sup> There is also a significant economic benefit to society when children enter school ready to learn.<sup>8</sup> This year, only 65% of Baltimore City children entered kindergarten fully ready to learn.<sup>9</sup> Port Discovery strives to raise these numbers through interactive exhibits and programs,<sup>10</sup> recognizing that positive, playful experiences in the earliest years nurture a child's ability to learn.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Education Department intentionally creates programs that help preschoolers build language and literacy skills.<sup>12</sup> Since obesity is a huge problem in the United States today, diner programs also are designed to teach children about healthy eating.<sup>13</sup>

Through play, young visitors build knowledge of the world around them and their place in it.<sup>14</sup> Creative play sparks the imagination, encouraging children to see beyond the known, practice teamwork, follow directions, and exercise problem solving skills.<sup>15</sup> By offering programs created for the under-five crowd, Port Discovery is addressing the needs of early learners, an essential aspect of children's museums.<sup>16</sup>

## **Port Discovery's Strategies for Creating Healthy Food-related Programs**

Over time, we've created a strategy for developing school programs in the diner. We change them frequently to keep them fresh. We always start by choosing the read-aloud book. All of our programs meet the follow criteria:

1. Support the common core standards.<sup>17</sup>
2. Be captivating for the audience.
3. Be short in duration.
4. Promote nutrition.
5. Utilize the exhibit space in a unique way.
6. Include elements that educators will consider valuable.
7. Be interactive.
8. Have an element of humor.

9. Include a literacy component (read-aloud book).
10. Activate more than one of the intelligences.<sup>18</sup>

Once a picture book has been chosen for a diner program, the planning begins. We look for fun activities that support the healthy eating theme while also complementing the book being read aloud.<sup>19</sup> Brainstorming together, modifying games we played as children, looking through books, and searching on the Internet are ways we find theme-related activities that fit into a programming area of *Tiny's Diner*.<sup>20</sup>

We send a copy of the proposed program to the Early Childhood “Ed-Ventures Team,” an advisory group of educators consisting of two preschool teachers, one college professor, one early literacy professional, two children’s librarians, one teacher, one nutritionist, and one museum professional for comments. Once feedback has been received and integrated (or not!) into the program, the early childhood specialist writes a description for our Special Programs Guide. The guide is posted on the museum’s website and distributed to teachers in different venues such as conferences and teacher trainings. The guide reminds teachers to ask if programs are available in *Tiny's Diner* when booking visits; the group sales team follows up by mentioning the programs while booking school visits over the phone.

Guided preschool and early elementary classes at Port Discovery are booked for 45-minute sessions in each museum space. During the time that a class is scheduled for a program in *Tiny's Diner*, the doors to the exhibit are closed and the program begins. The first fifteen or twenty minutes are spent presenting the formal program; the remainder of the time is given to free play. *Tiny's Diner* is a



Families play together in *Tiny's Diner*.

replica of an actual diner which offers children a place to increase their ability both to listen and speak through dramatic play.<sup>21</sup> Early learners have opportunities to socialize, use their imaginations, and practice creative thinking and problem solving as they experiment with real life situations.<sup>22</sup>

Since the first moments set the tone for the rest of the session, programs generally start with a healthy dose of humor that grabs the children's attention. One program, "Who Would Eat a Shoe?" begins when a museum program associate wearing a chef's hat welcomes everyone into the diner and displays three plates, each one covered by a cloth. The chef whips the cover off the first plate to reveal . . . YARN! On the second plate is . . . A tin can! And on the third plate is . . . AN OLD SHOE! Who would want to eat those things? Perhaps a goat!

This introduction leads into reading aloud the picture book *Gregory the Terrible Eater* by Mitchell Sharmat.<sup>23</sup> When the story is finished, the program leader conducts a brief discussion about nutritious food. Children then examine pictures of all the foods and objects eaten by Gregory in the story. They take turns coming up to a flannel board with a line down the middle and place their picture either on the side labeled "people food" or on the other side labeled "goat food." When the program finishes, children are invited to create some nutritious dishes in the diner as they begin free play. This is typical of the diner programs at Port Discovery.

Music plays an important part in the fun and educational activities that we've devised. Dancing peas (laminated green construction paper circles), inspired by *Eat Your Peas, Louise* by Pegeen Snow, invite children to sing and dance the "Hokey Pea-okey" ("You put your pea in, you take your pea out, you put your pea in, and you shake it all about") and "Head, Shoulders, PEAS and Toes."<sup>24</sup> Program associates have the option of presenting a Kamishibai Theatre show to a silly song which we discovered on YouTube, "I Got a Pea" by Bryant Oden.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the book and the funny activities, children look at photographs of peas growing in gardens, pea pods, children shelling peas, and pea soup. To help them get started with free play, we tell them that the special of the day in *Tiny's Diner* is pea soup.

A current program features the book *Two Eggs, Please*, by Sarah Weeks.<sup>26</sup> While giving the message that people are both different and the same, this book also lists a number of ways that eggs can be prepared. After the story is read, children pretend to be different kinds of eggs. Have you ever seen a child trying to be a sunny side up egg? What about a poached egg? Or hard-boiled? Children are able to exercise their imaginations and their bodies during this movement activity. And, if they have difficulty coming up with ideas, program associates are

ready to prompt them, using teaching ideas suggested in the lesson plan. This program ends with “The Chicken Dance” and children are then invited to create some healthy breakfasts as they begin their free-play.

Through informal conversations, program associate feedback, and written teacher surveys, it is clear that the formal program enhances the following free play.<sup>27</sup> Response from other educators has been positive. Dr. Lisa Parker Eason, principal of the Dr. Rayner Browne Academy in Baltimore, appreciates the connection between the common core standards and the programs.<sup>28</sup> Susan Hahn, Parent Services Representative from Baltimore County Public Schools, considers the diner programs to be “a great day of learning.”<sup>29</sup>

“Combining nutrition, literacy, learning, and play is very important at the preschool and elementary school age,” says Lyssa Balick, a nutritionist for McCormick and Company, Inc. who presents “Cook and Tell” programs in *Tiny's Diner* along with Port Discovery staff.<sup>30</sup> She continued,

We enjoy this approach when we partner with Port Discovery to show how kids can use spices and herbs to flavor healthy foods. Children in a group setting have different learning styles and backgrounds. But there is something they all have in common: all kids like to play. Port Discovery makes healthy food programs interactive and fun for everyone. Port Discovery teaches the important nutritional messages that healthy food can taste good and that eating nutritious food is easy and something everyone can do. In *Tiny's Diner* programs, children don't just hear books being read aloud; they also play with the words — using music and cooking and movement and fun. It is the perfect learning environment.<sup>31</sup>

Because the programs in *Tiny's Diner* captivate children's hearts and minds, children are able to focus on the book and activities before free play begins. Teachers see the educational value of the programs and program associates are able to impart the message about nutrition in a relaxed, non-didactic way. Everybody wins! The most important part of these programs, however, is the health benefit of fun and laughter which is shared by all.<sup>32</sup>

## Notes

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5. Connie Liakos Evers, *How to Teach Nutrition to Kids* (Portland, OR: 24 Carrot Press, 2006) is a useful resource.
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8. James J. Heckman, in *Schools, Skills and Synapses* (Bonn, Germany: Institute for the Study of Labor, 2008), uses mathematical formulas to explain the economic benefit for investing in early childhood education. Savings due to lower rates of incarceration are significant. "Heckman: The Economics of Human Potential." <http://www.heckmanequation.org/content/resource/school-skills-synapses> (accessed June 2012).
9. The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Data by State/Maryland/Ready for Kindergarten-Average of Language and Literacy and Mathematical Thinking (Percent) 2007-2008*. Kids Count Data Center (2012). <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/bystate/Rankings.aspx?state=MD&ind=4502> (accessed May 2012).
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20. *Tiny's Diner* is 672 square feet; the programming area is approximately 11' × 26'.
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22. Russ, S. W., "Play, Creativity, and Adaptive Functioning: Implications for Play Interventions" *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology* 27, no. 4 (1998): 469–80.
23. Mitchell Sharmat (author), Jose Aruego (illustrator), and Ariane Dewey (illustrator), *Gregory the Terrible Eater* (New York: Four Winds Press, 1980).
24. Pegeen Snow (author), Mike Venezia (illustrator), *Eat Your Peas, Louise* (Chicago: Children's Press, 1991).
25. Kamishibai Theatre is an old form of Japanese story-telling that involves showing illustrations on paper cards one at a time and reading a script on the back of the last card while sliding the first one across. More information about Kamishibai can be found at [http://www.kamishibai.com/educators/readers\\_theatre.html](http://www.kamishibai.com/educators/readers_theatre.html). Permission to use the song was obtained from Bryant Oden. "I Got A Pea" is located on *Songdrops: 30 Songs for Kids* [S.I.]: (CD Baby, 2009), and can be accessed from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q6DdTcqGy8>.

26. Sarah Weeks (author) and Betsy Lewin (illustrator), *Two Eggs, Please* (New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 2003).
27. Based on Port Discovery teacher exit surveys from Sept. 2011–May 2012.
28. Excerpt from Dr. Lisa Parker Eason’s email to Nora Moynihan on May 22, 2012.
29. Excerpt from Susan Hahn’s email to Nora Moynihan on June 2, 2012.
30. Excerpt from Lyssa Balick’s email to Betsy Diamant-Cohen on May 23, 2012.
31. Ibid.
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