

MetLife Foundation
and
Association of Children's Museums

Promising
Practice
AWARD

Port Discovery Children's Museum
Baltimore, Maryland

IMPACTING COMMUNITIES
THROUGH MUSEUM PARTNERSHIPS



Assisted by his grandmother and a Port Discovery staff member, a child with a developmental disability uses a scooter to navigate an obstacle course in the museum.

Sometimes, the best way to create community impact is to join forces with other like-minded organizations. Among Baltimore City's 640,000 people, including 45,000 children under the age of five, are families who are homeless or have a child with special needs. Many of them can feel isolated from the rest of the community. In response to the need to provide an inclusive, therapeutic community for these families, Port Discovery Children's Museum and PACT: Helping Children With Special Needs (an affiliate of the Kennedy Krieger Institute), developed a series of programs that mines the museum's rich exhibit environment.

Key to the program's effectiveness—and to the partnership's success—was an extensive evaluation component launched in 2007, the program's pilot year. As a result of this careful monitoring, by the spring of 2009, the program had blossomed into a model for offering services in a playful, community-oriented environment different from traditional therapy settings.

Evolution of the Partnership

Port Discovery and PACT staff met in 2007 to discuss a partnership that would serve families who fall between the cracks and provide them with an inclusive—and playful—therapeutic community. Visiting each other's locations, staffs discussed their missions, services, institutional values, unique features and internal resources and strengths.

These fact-finding meetings revealed many commonalities, including complementary missions and an interest in providing early intervention services. PACT promotes the development of young children with special needs and helps their families through specialized childcare programs, comprehensive assessments, early intervention services, family support, parent education, counseling and professional training. Port Discovery provides experiences that ignite imagination, inspire learning and nurture growth through play.

Both organizations value early intervention; both work with caregivers and the children under their care. Port Discovery's skilled staff and its interactive, stimulating environment mesh perfectly with PACT's proven intervention programs where highly qualified therapeutic staff work with parents and their young children. After an initial planning process that included program development, fundraising and staff development, Port Discovery and PACT implemented pilot pro-

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grams that served twenty-eight families divided into specialized groups.

The first program, Helping Your Child in the Community, served children under age four who were already receiving therapeutic services through PACT. Participants' diagnoses included Down's syndrome, autism, cleft palate, Dandy Walker Syndrome, and cytomegalovirus (CMV). During sessions,

The 2009 Promising Practice Award honors exhibits, programs and management practices that measure the impact of diversity, health and play programs on children and communities.

caregivers learned how to help children interact with peers and engage in positive social experiences in community settings. Therapists and museum staff supported participants as they worked on communication, self-help and sensory and coordination skills. Therapists also provided group support to parents.

The second program, Family Traditions Groups, focused on children and their parents who, either currently or in the past, have resided in a homeless shelter. Despite their living circumstances, families explored ways to celebrate important occasions, build family memories and establish family traditions. Parents learned new ways to respond to their children's needs. Program activities enhanced parent-child interactions, helped family meals run smoothly, emphasized the importance of family conversation, increased parents' knowledge of child development and decreased parental stress.

The Family Traditions Groups started with a meal in the museum's *Diner* exhibit followed by circle time with staff, parents and children. Parents were encouraged to follow their child's lead on a special parent-child activity. Each group ended with a parents-only group activity that examined rituals and celebrations that were important to each family. In the final evaluation, participants acknowledged the importance of the following:

- engaging in quality family-time activities;
- talking to children to enhance language comprehension;
- recognizing communication cues;
- smiling at babies to increase happiness and brain growth.

The third program, Caregivers Come Together, focused on enhancing the social and emotional coping skills of parents of young children with special needs. Sessions began with staff and families sitting together in a circle, singing greeting songs and participating in activities that promoted parent-child bonding. Afterwards, Port Discovery staff and PACT therapists guided children through various museum exhibits where the team focused on skills such as walking, learning patience, verbal expression, muscle development and working together as a group. Simultaneously, parents worked in separate areas of the museum on projects designed to increase their self-esteem. At the end of each session, staff and parents gathered to talk about observations, successes and lessons learned.

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Lessons Learned / Program Evaluation

A thorough staff training and development plan was critical for relationship building and conducting cohesive programs between two partners. PACT's training for museum staff included 1) ways to include children with medical, developmental and behavioral needs, and 2) strategies for enhancing parent-child attachment between high-risk infants or toddlers and their parents.

Lessons learned from the pilot year included a mutual need for training and orientation about organizational cultures, planning processes, policies and procedures that could affect program offerings and logistical constraints. The evaluation process, critical at every step during the pilot year, provided valuable information for future programming. Both partners administered surveys and questionnaires to measure and evaluate the impact of the program.

1. A parent pretest asked parents questions about their child's ability to communicate with adults using words and their ability to communicate likes and dislikes.

2. A family satisfaction survey probed opinions about program quality and staff knowledge. Among the results of this survey?

- 83 percent of the parents were very



With her mother nearby, a child watches bubbles rise in a tube to improve her visual tracking. This calming activity also helps her to get focused for other tasks.

satisfied/mostly satisfied with the quality of services they received.

- 100 percent of the parents were very satisfied/mostly satisfied that therapists and museum staff were knowledgeable and ready to listen to their concerns.

3. A staff satisfaction survey examined the interaction between both organizations' staffs and the opportunity for professional growth. Open-ended questions encouraged staff to voice their opinions on the program's strengths and areas needing im-

provement. Results showed that 100% of Port Discovery staff were satisfied or mostly satisfied with the training they received and felt comfortable working with kids with physical, behavioral, sensory or communication challenges. PACT staff, though not formally surveyed, expressed similar positive feelings during debriefing sessions.

4. Weekly post-session debriefings between PACT and museum staff gave both organizations the opportunity to discuss successes and challenges while planning for the upcoming week.

Through written evaluations, observations and weekly documentation, parent and staff feedback was collected and analyzed. At a debriefing meeting following the final group sessions, the partners openly discussed future directions for the program—including areas that needed improvement—while celebrating the success of this unique partnership. Port Discovery and PACT look forward to entering the next phase of this joint project that uses the museum as a staging ground for community change and early intervention.

—Nora Moynihan, Director of Education and Community Enrichment and
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Association of Children's Museums

children's museums as well as other museums with an interest in both child and family audiences, individuals and corporate members.

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When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.
—Persian proverb

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