

**The Present and Future of Children's Museums:  
Hotspots of Creativity and Self-Directed Learning**  
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Good evening. It's a pleasure to be here with you on the occasion of your *Visions for the Future* fundraiser. And it is a privilege to speak on behalf of our field, the fastest growing museum sector in the world – Children's Museums.

According to the website of our service organization, the Association of Children's Museums, there are currently 341 Children's Museums, representing a total of 22 countries, and approximately 23 percent of these children's museums are in the start-up phase. According to 2007 data, more than 30 million children and families annually visited children's museums. Children's Museums are unique in the museum field. We are hotspots of creativity and self-directed learning. We are not home, not school, but a third-place all its own, where discovery, creativity, problem solving, experimentation, sharing and community building thrive, all in the interest of young children and their families. And we are key community gathering places, where diverse families can play and celebrate together in a welcoming environment.

Let's consider the assets and opportunities for children's museums, then the challenges we face, and how we can equip ourselves to navigate a changing environment.

Children's museums are differentiated from other museums in an important way: their focus is on self-directed play and informal learning. Boston Children's Museum has been

a model experiment in informal education since its founding 103 years ago. Today this is manifest in open ended exploration and hands-on interaction. This is an attribute we share with all children's museums in the US and around the world. Although many Science Centers share these attributes, Children's Museums are different in that we were not created to explore a particular subject or area of study, we were created FOR a singular sector of our population: young children, their families, guardians and teachers. Thus, any subject matter that is relevant to the developing child is pertinent to a children's museum: art, dance, music, theatre, science, design, math, health and wellness, world cultures, community building and cross cultural understanding, parent support, and of course, one of the most central areas of programming in our museums: school readiness and school success.

Children's museums offer an environment and an experience that cannot be found anywhere else. They leverage their multi-content, rich and stimulating environments to engage children's natural curiosity. Children's museums are language rich, and contribute to word acquisition, creative thinking, and overall brain building at the most key stage of life, when the brain is developing at its quickest pace. They build self confidence, parent-child relationships, and develop important habits of mind – inviting children to question, wonder, imagine and dream, all of which are critical to a child's cognitive and socio-emotional development. Importantly, they are a refuge from television, screen time, and passive recreation. At their best, Children's Museums are hotspots for creativity, one of the most valued commodities in any realm.

Every two years since 2002, IBM has conducted its Global CEO survey. This survey of business leaders is designed to shed light on the challenges and goals facing today's CEOs. The 1,500 participants come from leading organizations around the world in industry, communications, financial services and the public sector in countries from North America, Latin America, Europe, Japan, the Middle East and Africa.

In 2010, CEOs cited **complexity** as the most significant challenge they face. CEOs described the world as increasingly "volatile, uncertain, and complex." And the report states that "most CEOs seriously doubted their own ability to cope with this rapidly increasing complexity."

Respondents agreed that the new economic environment is structurally and fundamentally different, requiring leaders to discard "old business models, old ways of working, and long held assumptions." They said that today's leaders need to be more innovative, willing to make quick decisions, take calculated risks, and find new ideas and ways of leading and communicating.

They said **creativity** was now the most important leadership quality. "Creative leaders," they said, "invite disruptive innovation, encourage others to drop outdated approaches and take balanced risks." "They are open-minded and inventive in expanding their management and communication styles, particularly to engage with a

new generation of employees, partners and customers.” “Creative leaders,” the report says, “are comfortable with ambiguity and experimentation. They are radical in their conception and execution.” As one CEO in the study put it, “Creativity is everything.”

If we consider this notion, that creativity is considered by the majority of business leaders around the world as a highly desirable 21<sup>st</sup> century leadership quality, then we must ask ourselves, are we now developing and producing creative, imaginative, brave students and young professionals who will become the “disruptive innovators” of the future? Are we nurturing these qualities in our schools, universities, cultural institutions and in our society? If we know that children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to become more creative, we need to understand how creativity is born and how it can be nurtured throughout one’s life.

Traditionally, society segments us into those who are creative and those who are not. There are the great musicians, actors, painters and writers, who make up the 1% of “the creatives” and then there is the 99% of the rest of us, mere mortals whose only hope of creative expression is posting our holiday photos on Facebook. But most of us will remember our earliest creative experiences: playing with the cardboard box from a new appliance, making and then flying paper airplanes, drawing a picture, inventing a game, or imagining oneself as a super hero. You may remember creating games with your friends in the park or in your backyard or whiling away the summer looking at the sky and imagining animals and birds taking shape in the fluffy white clouds. These

experiences not only helped us develop important skills like problem solving, observation, and experimentation, they set us on a path of interpreting information, developing ideas, collaborating with others, and making connections between us and our world. All of these skills are part of what makes up creativity and all of these experiences are part of what we understand as play.

In a TED talk of 2008, that took place at the Art Center Design conference in Pasadena California, with the theme of Serious Play, designer Tim Brown, asserted that play is at the root of creative thinking, that playfulness can help us do our jobs better, and find more innovative solutions. Play can help us be more adaptive, collaborative, spontaneous and inventive. Brown believes that the relaxation and trust that is the result of people playing together can lead to an increased willingness to take risks. In fact, scientist Stuart Brown, President of the National Institute of Play, asserts that play is a fundamental aspect of life; as necessary as sleep and dreams. Play teaches empathy, trust and social skills, and that “creative, unstructured free play” is critical to the development of healthy, well-balanced human beings.

Although play has always been an integral part of childhood, we know that today parents are increasingly worried that their children do not have the opportunities for open and free play. Many children spend over 30 hours per week watching television, and that is added to their screen time on apps and video games. In addition, the increased emphasis on testing has prevented teachers from encouraging self-directed

learning in the classroom. Even school recess has been diminishing and many young children are now overscheduled with adult supervised activities.

But Children's Museums are the antidote – they contain the raw materials of discovery and creativity – artifacts, objects, tools (scissors, blocks, paint, paper, tape, costumes, etc.), large enticing play spaces, theatres, and outdoor areas of exploration. Many are now developing classrooms and workshop spaces, where children and their parents can prepare for school, like Boston Children's Museum's Kindergarten Classroom. These imaginative community hubs provide the tools for limitless creative play, play that encourages spontaneity, innovative thinking, and making imaginative connections; the exact attributes CEOs say are needed in our 21<sup>st</sup> work force.

Developing creative, attentive, imaginative, engaged children, and encouraging parents and caregivers to open the doors to rich, informal learning experiences would be more than enough to validate the importance of Children's Museums but they have another, even more critical, role to serve, and that is as a key community resource, bringing diverse families together, serving as an advocate, and partnering with business, education, and government to create more options for low income and special needs families.

They are a refuge in times of tragedy and disaster such the children's museums of Connecticut after the Sandy Hook tragedy, the Louisiana Children's Museum after

Hurricane Katrina and Boston Children's Museum following the Marathon bombing.

And, more than any other type of museum, Children's Museums have multiple ways of welcoming families on a low budget, through free days, school group visits, community passes and the fast growing EBT cardholder discounts. This aspect of our work, which is a growing and expanding mandate for children's museums, makes us not only distinct from every other Museum sector, but is catching the attention of the nation's top philanthropic organizations and government officials. In fact, in 2013, Boston Children's Museum received the nation's highest honor for Museums, the National Medal, for its multiple community building efforts. With the increasing polarization of our society and our world, Children's Museums are the only Museum sector whose mission at its core is to provide a safe space for all children and their families, to meet together, play together and learn about each other's cultures and ways of life, and, in effect, work towards a peaceful future.

And, speaking about the future, Children's Museums have an important branding attribute that appeals to millennials – the generation that is now having children – in that we are purpose driven, and more trustworthy than most organizations. We have a clear point of view and mission.

Because of all of these things, Children's Museums are well positioned to address the issues and trends present in our markets:

- The need for new skills to compete in a complex world
- The negative effects of too much screen time

- The desire by educated parents to expose their kids to rich experiences
- An increased emphasis on children’s physical and mental health
- The persistent limitations of our formal education system
- Lack of school readiness of children entering kindergarten and a growing achievement gap.

In fact, in their ground breaking document Growing Young Minds, the Institute of Museum and Library Sciences in Washington D.C. wrote, “Libraries and museums can play a significant role in early learning for all children. As our nation commits to early learning as a national priority essential to our economic and civic future, it is time to become more intentional about engaging these vital community resources. Libraries and museums reach millions of parents and children each year. They are trusted, welcoming places where children make discoveries, deepen common interests, expand words and knowledge, and connect their natural curiosity to the wider world.”

This is all good news, but as leaders and supporters of Children’s Museums, we know we face formidable challenges too:

- Increased competition for family time and money
- Changing demographics
- The requirement to understand and be responsive to the market, to communicate our value and to manage our organizations more professionally

At Boston Children’s Museum we see our core competencies as being well aligned with these challenges, but it takes continual investment and attention to: innovation, staff development, marketing, human resources, finances, outreach and the visitor experience to succeed. This speaks to the need for children’s museums to be managed with the same rigor as a business. While we are non-profits, and have an education and social mission, we need to manage our activities against a strategy, goals and objectives,



and standards of performance. We need to measure our outcomes, and conduct research. Few of us have endowments, and the margin for error is small. Above all else, we need to remain vital and relevant, seeking new ways to meet the needs of our children, parents, families, donors, civic leaders and our communities and society at large.

At Boston Children's Museum, we are spending a lot of time thinking about how to engage parents in their children's learning and development. We are seeking new innovations in exhibits and programs. We are trying to appeal more to older children, in order to keep our families connected longer to our museum. We are seeking to be faster to market with new ideas, are conducting deeper and more strategic market research. And we are spending a lot of time refining the compelling story we tell about ourselves to supporters.

So keeping a Children's Museum relevant, fresh and continually improving in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be complicated and challenging, but the result is moving and rewarding. When we see children absorbed in the process of making, questioning, observing, discovering, predicting, and describing we know we are succeeding. When we see them practicing these skills that will make them more engaged, creative learners and thinkers; we know we are ultimately making better citizens and stronger, smarter and more creative leaders for our increasingly complex world.

So, as YOU now prepare for the next exciting phase in your growth and, as you develop, promote and celebrate your central place in allowing children to express their innate curiosity in the world and their great capacity for imagination and creativity, and you welcome all children and their families, and serve your entire community, you must also celebrate your key role in **making better citizens**. After all, is there any better or loftier goal than this?