



Information Brief:

The role of children's museums in supporting children's mental health

Mental health is important.

The World Health Organization defines mental health as “a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.”¹ Mental health is a complex concept that includes a combination of social, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects. These factors substantially influence the ways we engage with other people, manage stressful situations, and make decisions.² In recent years, mental health has been increasingly prominent among national conversations. Although the spotlight has often focused on the needs of adults and youth, growing evidence also demonstrates that even the youngest children are facing substantial need with respect to mental health. Indeed, mental health is a foundational element of child development; children cannot experience optimal growth and development if their mental health is poor and mental health struggles in childhood can have long-lasting effects.³ This document provides an overview of some primary research trends about children's mental health and then shares insights about how children's museums—community-serving organizations that reach millions of U.S. children each year—can bolster children's mental health.

Children have urgent mental health needs.

Children are experiencing rapidly rising levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, leading healthcare professionals to declare that children's mental health is in crisis.⁴ Young people often lack the support systems they need to cope as they struggle to navigate increasing social isolation, bullying, environmental stressors, family upheaval, and many other factors that threaten their mental health.^{5,6,7,8} Although some children experienced mental health benefits from the pandemic lifestyle, the lasting negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on many children's mental health are now well documented.^{9,10,11} Yet children's mental health has been declining since before the pandemic, and it continues to be a growing problem as COVID-19 numbers have receded.¹² The demand for children's mental health services has been growing for over a decade and reached an all-time high in 2022, coinciding with a shortage of mental health professionals with the capacity to meet this need.^{13,14} About one in five U.S. children between the ages of two and eight have diagnoses for mental health conditions—most often consisting of ADHD, anxiety, behavior outcomes, and depression--and likely many additional children experience mental health struggles that go undiagnosed.^{15,16} Children's mental health can be affected by a variety of factors ranging from genetics to demographic factors to family or community events to global trends such as climate change.^{17,18} Fortunately, there are many promising factors that can have a positive impact on children's mental health.

Children's museums can help.

By providing enriching experiences that nurture children's mental health, children's museums are an important element of children and families' mental health support systems. Museums are not substitutes for professional mental health services. Yet children need holistic networks of care that extend beyond clinical settings and into their homes, schools, and out-of-school time activities. School age children spend two-thirds of their waking

hours outside of school, offering museums a tremendous opportunity to provide safe spaces for enrichment in these hours.¹⁹ The following sections outline several research-based ways that children's museums can be vital partners in the effort to enhance children's mental health.

Children's museums are designed for children to practice social-emotional skills.

The growing recognition of children's widespread mental health needs has led to a significant rise in attention to the development of social-emotional skills in schools and informal learning settings like museums. By strengthening these skills for all learners, schools and informal learning centers can reduce the strain on the healthcare system and reach a far greater number of children—many of whom may never receive formal mental health diagnoses but nonetheless benefit from social-emotional support. Numerous children's museums are now drawing on research-based practices to intentionally design for social-emotional outcomes such as building empathy, mindfulness, or even addressing specific topics such as children's climate-focused anxieties.^{20,21,22} Some museums have trained facilitators who lead programming with visitors whereas others design unfacilitated exhibits that promote social-emotional skill development. A comparison of children's interactions on playgrounds versus in children's museums demonstrated that designed museum learning environments effectively fostered more opportunities for children to practice emotional regulation and social skills than typical playgrounds.²³

Children's museums support mental health through play.

In recent decades, there has been a shift towards more structured learning and less free play for children. Yet play is known to be effective at fostering children's healthy brain development, social skills, and the ability to cope with stress.²⁴ There are numerous types of play that children's museums regularly foster. For instance, play that involves exercise and gross motor activity is associated with lower levels of stress and depression.²⁵ Museums that have outdoor space can generate mental health benefits through nature-based play.^{26,27} Interpersonal play--such as pretending and imaginative exploration--is connected with the healthy development of emotional regulation skills.²⁸ For these reasons and more, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that physicians provide a "prescription for play" for young children²⁹—a prescription that families can easily fill at their local children's museum.

Children's museums provide artistic opportunities for healing.

Although every children's museum has a different approach to its educational experiences, many museums engage visitors in making art—a practice that can have positive effects on mental health. Although museums may not be prepared to facilitate validated art therapy techniques, even simple arts-based programming can have beneficial impacts. For instance, children's coloring activities can reduce anxiety.³⁰ Children build emotional intelligence by expressing their emotions through art.³¹ Beyond the practice of making art, simply experiencing art in a museum can promote a sense of emotional restoration among children and can improve wellbeing and reduce stress for any age, particularly among repeat visitors.^{32,33,34}

Children's museums affirm children's positive identity development.

Whether related to race, gender, the stigma of having a disability, or other factors, recent years have brought attention to mental health concerns related to children's identity development.³⁵ However, there is evidence that efforts to affirm positive identity development are effective in reducing or eliminating these mental health struggles.^{36,37,38} As public institutions, children's museums are designed to welcome all learners. Museums have invested heavily in diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI) efforts to embrace marginalized visitors

and have committed to expand this work moving into the future.^{39,40} Although there are ongoing needs for improvement in DEAI work within the museum field, there is also promising evidence that museum efforts can effectively support children's positive identity development as it relates to demographic factors, as well as broader categories such as gaining confidence to see one's self as a scientist, artist, engineer, or maker.^{41,42,43}

Children's museums support children's mental health by being there for grown-ups too.

Children's mental health is affected by the adults around them; when adults are well, they are better able to support the growth and development of children in their care.^{44,45} While children's museums typically center their approaches around the experience of the child, the children who visit museums almost always come with adult family members, friends, caregivers, or teachers—and museums can have a positive impact on mental health for all ages. The outcomes described above (practicing social-emotional skills, play, art, and identity development) can benefit adults as well as children.^{46,47,48,49} Additionally, museums employ a range of strategies—such as signage, activities, programming, and resources—to influence adult learning.⁵⁰ These strategies can be directed towards providing guidance about how adults can further their own and their children's mental health.

Children's museums collaborate with mental health professionals and community partners.

Finally, children's museums amplify their strengths through collaborations with one another and with other organizations and individuals. Many children's museums have a small number of staff who do heroic work to welcome huge crowds of people and may not have capacity to launch a mental health initiative. Furthermore, museum staff bring a wide range of expertise and lived experiences that does not always involve training in mental health. Yet museums are highly resourceful in finding ways to bridge connections and expand their reach to meet their communities' needs. Examples include children's museums that are working with mental health professionals to collaboratively build interactive learning spaces within hospitals; museums that are welcoming mental health professionals to co-develop learning experiences with museum staff; museums that are inviting researchers to partner in developing and delivering social-emotional learning curriculum in their museums, and more.^{51,52,53}

Children's museums have long been invested in creating environments where children thrive. Mental health is a pressing current issue for the children in our communities, and children's museums have expansive opportunity to meet those needs with comprehensive, collaborative experiences that supplement the essential work of mental health professionals—providing all children with the skills to navigate their world with joy, wonder, and wellness.

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For more information, visit our website at www.childrensmuseums.org

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