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Families of autistic children find The Children’s Museum is a great place for them to learn, socialize with others

Two Indianapolis families say they have noticed their children open up after exploring the museum’s *PlayScape*, an interactive play area. One family even brought a therapist with them.

Access Pass, a program that offers \$1 admission to the museum for qualifying low-income families, made it possible for these families to visit again and again, to build on learning experiences.

Whenever Debra Burbridge takes her granddaughters to The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, she says the first thing they want to do is go to *PlayScape*, an interactive play area for young children. Four-year-old Ella and 1-year-old Beatrice enjoy crawling through the tunnels, stacking building blocks and sifting through the sand area. Burbridge said when she sees Ella interacting with other children at the museum — sharing toys and playing next to them — a smile beams across her face. That’s because Ella has been diagnosed with autism, a neural development disorder that affects the way children communicate and socially interact.

To see Ella playing with other children is a big deal, Burbridge said, and she thinks The Children’s Museum is responsible for bringing her out of her shell. “Sometimes I just want to cry because I see her interact with the other children and it’s important,” she said. “I know this is helping her.”

Throughout The Children’s Museum’s five floors are numerous exhibit spaces dedicated to early childhood learning. Children can sort colorful toy vegetables in the marketplace in *Take Me There: Egypt* or move their hands through the interactive watershed table in *ScienceWorks*. While these hands-on learning activities can help all kids, childhood development experts say the museum’s environment can be especially conducive for learning opportunities for special needs children.

Judy Hancock, an occupational therapist in Indianapolis who often works with special needs children, said she’s recommended the museum to many of her patients. She’s even held therapy sessions in *PlayScape*, which she says is an ideal environment to work on socialization, motor skills, sorting, recognizing shapes and other important skills. “There’s so much variety in *PlayScape* and it’s all so educational that it’s a great place for kids to learn while playing,” she said. “It’s pretty impressive.”

Hancock recommended the museum to Carrie Jones, a 36-year-old Indianapolis mother, who has a 4-year-old daughter, Sadie, who was diagnosed with autism. After a wonderful therapy session with Hancock, Jones said she’s returned to the museum at least 10 times in the past year. She said she thinks the museum does wonders for encouraging socialization.

“When you’re at the Children’s Museum and you’re playing in *PlayScape*, there are so many kids that you can’t hide in your own world; there’s a kid an inch away from you, probably hitting you with their elbow when you’re playing,” Jones said. “Autistic kids turn into themselves a lot, but it’s a lot harder to do that with all the kids there. You almost can’t avoid interaction with other kids. So it teaches her how to play and I’m close by to watch.”

Burbridge, a 52-year-old grandmother from Indianapolis, said she notices the same development in her Ella. “I take her to a lot of different places, trying to expose her to different things and she’s a little reluctant at some places,” she said, “but at the museum she feels so comfortable that she opens up and socializes with other children. With autistic children, they aren’t as sociable, so we have to work at it. The museum is one of the ways we get to work at it.”

Both families said they are able to afford multiple visits to the museum because of a discounted program for certain low-income Indiana families. The Access Pass program offers \$1 admission to Indiana families on TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), food stamps or Hoosier Healthwise Insurance. These families can present a Hoosier Works card or Hoosier Healthwise Insurance card, together with photo identification, at the Box Office to receive \$1 admission for immediate family members. Conner Prairie also offers the Access Pass program. Membership lasts for one year and can be renewed.

More information about the program is available at www.childrensmuseum.org/accesspass/index.htm.

Burbridge said she left her job to be able to care for Ella full time, and so she appreciates the low-cost program. “It’s a huge help,” she said. “Money is tight and this is just such an amazing program.”

Ella enjoys her visits to the museum, but it’s just as much fun for her grandmother. Burbridge said it’s a delight to be able to see her play with other children in a safe environment. There are no tantrums or meltdowns. All in all, it makes for a great day, she said. “We’ve never had a bad experience at the museum,” she said. “The learning and the interaction, it’s just awesome. It’s a good day when we come home from there because she’s calm. It’s just great.”