

Museums in a Pandemic: Social & Health Services Collaborations

April 27, 2021

The ACM Trends Reports team has continued to study the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s museums. To understand the situation, we conducted two surveys, the first in May 2020, and the second from September 24 to October 18, 2020. Overall, 96 US-based children’s museums participated in the survey.

In the fall 2020 survey, 81 museums reported starting new collaborations or expanding existing collaborations since the beginning of the pandemic, while 15 museums reported no new or expanded collaborations. Those with collaborations started an average of two or three collaborative activities during the pandemic. This Trends Report focuses on collaborations with **social and health services** organizations, including food banks, shelters, blood banks, and community health clinics. This is the first of three Trends Reports that tell the story of how children’s museums have undertaken collaborative work during a time of crisis.

The Museums in a Pandemic series of Trends Reports illustrates the ways children’s museums have adapted to the evolving national and local situations surrounding the pandemic. This series is also part of Museums Mobilize, an initiative of the Association of Children’s Museums that documents COVID-specific responses and innovations by children’s museums. While many children’s museums’ buildings have been closed to the public and they have faced unprecedented operational challenges throughout the pandemic, institutions around the world are offering critical programs in service to children and families.

ACM TRENDS

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We asked museums about whether they had expanded existing collaborations or initiated new collaborations with different types of organizations during the pandemic. Out of 96 museums, 59 museums (61%) reported collaborations with social and health services organizations, such as food banks, homeless shelters, blood banks, community health clinics, and hospitals. We also asked participants about the goals for their expanded or new collaborations. Partnerships around social and health services most likely focused on the goal of sharing resources and information (Figure 1).

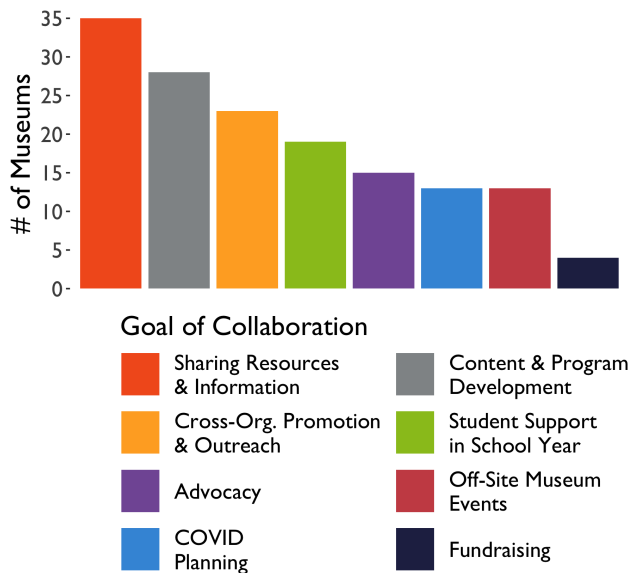


Figure 1. Goal of children’s museums’ collaborations with social and health service organizations.

This was followed by the goal of developing content and programming, with cross-institution promotion and outreach coming in third. COVID planning was not a top priority for this type of collaboration. Fundraising was the lowest priority for museums in terms of their collaborations with social and health organizations.

What follows are short accounts from four children’s museums about specific collaborations they developed with other organizations centered on providing social and health services to their communities.

Using Play to Improve Mental Health at Above & Beyond Children’s Museum

Above & Beyond Children’s Museum, located in Sheboygan, WI, is collaborating with Mental Health of America-Sheboygan County and YMCA of Sheboygan County on a mental health initiative called *Play is Healing* that uses play as a powerful healing agent. This is a three-phase program that spans a full year. Each phase centers on mental health and wellness through virtual and take-and-make options. Participants who sign up receive a link to participate in the sessions. Activities for the first phase of this collaboration include a Mindful Recess. These 20-minute virtual sessions are offered as mindful and playful breaks for elementary school students and their families.

The second phase of the collaboration features an initiative called *POP up in the Parks!* In this phase, the partners are providing outdoor programming in parks and outdoor venues throughout Sheboygan County, including at a local YMCA and two botanical gardens. This programming provides opportunities for children and families to participate in play, games, movement, and exercise. The partners are planning a third phase, slated to take place in 2021, which will offer indoor programs at the museum and the YMCA. The proposed programming will involve various exhibits and take place in different locations throughout both facilities. The intended age range for the program is 2 to 10 years old, and parents, families, and younger and older children are all welcome to join as well. The goal of this collaboration is to provide space for communities, families, and caregivers to reconnect through play as a way to heal the trauma brought on by isolation during the pandemic.

ACM Trends Reports

The Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) is the world’s foremost professional member service organization for the children’s museum field. We leverage the collective knowledge of children’s museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination. ACM has partnered with Knology to create the ACM Trends Reports. Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world.

ACM Trends Reports are commissioned on behalf of our membership to help advance the work of this community. They seek to draw attention to emerging issues and opportunities for elevating the field, and help our members use data to become more accountable to their mission and fiscal responsibilities. A product of collaborative efforts to collect data, the Trends Reports are an effort to support ongoing, accessible dialogue. Our objective is for this approach to be an equitable and inclusive way for museum professionals to contextualize our work and use data to produce effective outcomes.

Commenting on the importance of mental health programming, leaders from the museum noted that “We strive to be collaborative and respond to our community’s needs in creative, innovative ways. Carving out a focus on mental health in youth is part of our strategic plan and sets us up to continue expanding on this programmatic initiative moving forward.”

In addition, the museum offered community activity packages in partnership with Boys & Girls Club of Sheboygan County, Mental Health of America-Sheboygan County, and Nourish Farms during summer 2020. These packages provided 2,003 families with kits containing 5 to 9 different activities from collaborating organizations throughout the county. Each package included STEM, art-making, healthy nutrition, and mindfulness activities, as well as games to play.

Supporting Early Childhood Development at The Children’s Museum of Greater Fall River

The Children’s Museum of Greater Fall River, located in Fall River, MA, is collaborating with multiple partners: Fall River Public Schools, Department of Children and Family Services (DCF), and Bristol Community College. Their programming is focused on early childhood and is funded partially with a state grant. Specific partnership programming includes the *Service Learning with Early Childhood Students* initiative, which pairs college students studying early childhood with children ages 2 to 10 on STEAM projects. Students spend 10 hours each semester on a STEAM activity. The list of activities includes Sink and Float, an activity that incorporates the museum’s water room, and opportunities to mix colors based on the book *Mouse Paint* by Ellen Walsh. There are also opportunities for participants to make homemade play dough and slime. This program was put on hold in fall 2020, when Bristol College was remote due to COVID-19. However, the museum expects to resume the program in fall 2021.

The museum partners with DCF to host supervised visits for families that need support through weekly visits from case workers. Specifically, social service agencies use the museum space primarily for play with mentors and caseworkers. This offers children a more stimulating play

area during social services meetings. The museum also offers private space for meetings.

Before the onset of the COVID pandemic, the museum collaborated with Fall River Public Schools on a weekly *Play and Learn Preschool Program* and hosted a *Welcome To K. Night* for the public schools every summer. The *Play and Learn* program was suspended due to COVID-19.

Commenting on the benefits of these programs for members of the community, museum leadership remarked that they are “very proud of our reach in the community in 8 short years of being opened with a small staff.”

Activities for Preschool STEAM Learners at Bucks County Children’s Museum

Bucks County Children’s Museum, located in New Hope, PA, is collaborating with United Way of Bucks County. The collaboration, dubbed *PECO STEAM Kits for Kids*, is funded by PECO, a Philadelphia-area utility company. Additional support comes from Weis Markets, Books in Homes USA, and United Way of Bucks County. The program provides low-income families with preschool STEAM activity kits that they can enjoy at home.

The partners collaborate on preparing, assembling, and distributing the kits. United Way of Bucks County develops an annual preschool STEAM guide filled with family-friendly educational activities for young learners. United Way provides Bucks County Children’s Museum with the list of materials needed for each kit. Once the museum secures the materials and assembles the kits, United Way distributes them to preschool programs, parenting programs, and local hunger relief sites. To date, more than 1,000 kits have been distributed. By June 2021, 250 more kits will be distributed.

According to Bucks County Children’s Museum leadership, partnerships increase the museum’s capacity to serve all members of their community. “We are grateful that we can promote lifelong learning and make a deep impact despite our temporary closure due to the pandemic. Collaboration makes it possible for the museum to reach local kids experiencing the greatest need at a challenging time.”

At-Home Play Programming & Supply Distribution at Pretend City Children’s Museum

Pretend City Children’s Museum, located in Irvine, CA, offers several programs to support its community. In partnership with First Five Orange County, Early Childhood OC, Children’s Home Society, and The Boys and Girls Club of Orange County, the museum served as a distribution site for personal equipment and cleaning supplies to childcare providers. This program benefits licensed daycares and preschools in Orange County that serve essential workers and first responders. The supplies were packaged at the museum and were distributed to over 550 preschools and daycare centers each month during the COVID pandemic.

The museum has two other programs that are offered via its *Play at Home* initiative. This initiative includes Play at Home Virtual Programming and Play at Home Guides. The Play at Home Virtual Programming releases content weekly through Facebook Live that features materials for children and their families. The Play at Home Guides are designed to help families bring Pretend City exhibits into their homes. The guides offer resources for discussing different developmental milestones for each age group. Each guide includes activities that are themed to Pretend City exhibits to foster child development.

This content is also provided on the museum’s website and Facebook page. The program targets children ages 0 to 8 and their families. The second program, Parenting Under Quarantine: Winter Webinar Series, offers biweekly parenting webinars that cover topics in parenting and offer other forms of support. Winter topics focused on race and diversity, screen time, and mental health. The webinars have featured guest speakers from various local agencies and colleges. This content is viewed by parents and caregivers in Orange County, as well as across the

US. The program also provides access to free developmental screening tools online. This tool is vital for parents to understand their child’s development, especially during this turbulent time.

Commenting on the benefits of the programming for the community, museum leadership said, “*We are fortunate to have such great community partners that help us to provide services to our community. Our goal is to become a HUB for all early learning in the county, bringing together early childhood education and health experts.*”

The Takeaway

Children’s museums have a natural compatibility with organizations and agencies that serve the social and health needs of their communities. After all, children’s museums are social services for young people and their families. The variety of collaborations featured in this Trends Report demonstrate the diverse approaches that museums can take in this type of partnership, all of which support critical aspects of childhood development and families’ health. These stories also highlight the resources that museums can gain access to when they collaborate with social and health service organizations, including experts on topics important to families and volunteers with broad reach in their communities.

About This Research

Overall, 96 museums responded to at least part of the fall 2020 survey. A subset of museums that indicated they had new or expanded partnerships received an additional set of questions that asked for more information about collaborations focused on providing social and health services that they formed or expanded during the pandemic. Some of the data used in this report came from an online survey that ACM sent to US-based children’s museums.

Started in 1962, the Association of Children’s Museums (ACM) is the world’s foremost professional member service organization for the children’s museum field. With more than 460 members in 50 states and 19 countries, we leverage the collective knowledge of children’s museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination.

Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world. Since 2012, the collective of scientists, writers, and educators has been dedicated to studying and untangling complex social issues.



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