

Playing to Learn and Learning to Play

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Background + Framing

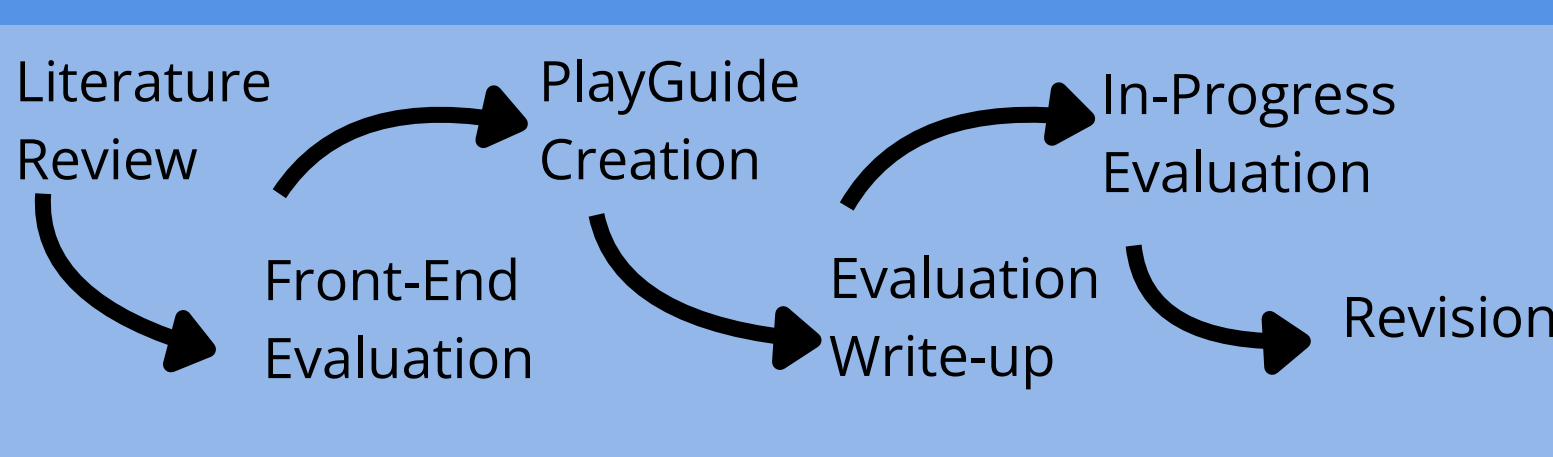
The concept of “play” is incredibly complex and can be defined many different ways. Yogman et. al. defines play as “an activity that is intrinsically motivated, entails active engagement, and results in joyful discovery.” Holman separates play into free and structured play. Most children’s museums have exhibits that are a mix of free and structured play. Caregivers who bring their children to these museums, can sometimes recognize that learning is happening during structured play but they struggle to identify exactly what it is their child is learning.

KidsQuest is a children's museum in Bellevue established in 1997. The museum has nine exhibit areas designed to promote different types of play and support caregivers in understanding what and how their children are learning. KidsQuest’s mission is: create learning through the power of play and exploration that connects children to their communities and the world.

Purpose

To create a set of PlayGuides linked to each of the KidsQuest’s exhibits which help to teach caregivers about early childhood learning through free and structured play, integrate this learning into their already existing programming, and help support the learning both in the museum and in the home

Process



Bibliography

Washington State Department of Children, Youth & Families. (2021). *Washington State Early Learning and Development Guidelines*. Olympia: DCYF.

Holman, C., Denworth, L. (2025). *Playful* (L. Denworth, Ed.). Penguin Random House.

Yogman, M., Garner, A., Hutchinson, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2018). The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children. *Pediatrics*, 142 (3). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-2058>

Deliverables

- Nine PlayGuides for nine of the exhibits at KidsQuest: Art Studio, Atrium Climber, Bellevue Mercantile, CityScapes, On the Go, Sticks + Stones, Story Tree, Tot Orchard, and Water. Each PlayGuide had:
 - Four to five sections that discussed ways children play in the exhibit and what they learn as they play.
 - “For Caregivers” is split into two sections “At KidsQuest” and “Back at Home”. “At KidsQuest” listed two to three ways that parents could interact with their children to augment their learning.
 - Eight of the nine PlayGuides included a short section, “For younger siblings”, outlining age-appropriate activities within each exhibit. The ninth PlayGuide, Tot Orchard, had a comparable section for older siblings in the toddler-focused exhibit.
- Evaluation: Formal write-up of the evaluation done at the museum and with the members.

Reflections

- Results
- Children’s skills fall into 3 categories: self skills (body, emotions, and self-expression), social skills (interacting with peers and adults), and school skills (including vocabulary, classification, and literacy).
 - Most parents see museum visits as ways to entertain their child rather than education, especially when that play is more active and/or creative. They don’t recognize that children learn a variety of skills through all types of play. PlayGuides like this help caregivers understand that while their child plays, they’re building valuable skills that prepare them for both school and life.
- Next Steps
- Format the PlayGuides and make them available in the museum.
 - Evaluate visitors on the usefulness of the PlayGuide. How much did they learn?
 - Evaluate the level of caregiver engagement with their child through observation.
 - Present the evaluation to the rest of the staff and use that information to help make decisions about future exhibits and events.
 - Make the PlayGuides available online to increase accessibility.