

Learning to Play and Playing to Learn Preliminary Evaluation at KidsQuest

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Abstract

This study examined what caregivers at KidsQuest Children's Museum know about learning through play and their impressions about KidsQuest. Through an in-person study and an online form, around 180 caregivers contributed their opinions, discussed their child's opinions, and explained what they believed the importance of play is. Studies show that play is important to children's social, physical, cognitive, and emotional development and creates optimal opportunities for caregivers to engage with their children. Results of this study suggest that caregivers and their children could benefit from more education on what children learn when they play.

Introduction

Play has been recognized as a critical aspect of childhood development since at least the 1890s but what is considered “play” exactly and what do children learn through it? The growing consensus is that play is an intrinsically motivated activity [Yogman et. al., 2018], meaning that people play for its inherent satisfaction, not for extrinsic rewards. Free play, as defined by Holman (2025), is play that is freely chosen and personally directed by the child. Yogman et. al. (2018) introduces the concept of structured play, or play that involves adult scaffolding. While both free and structured play have benefits related to executive functioning, language, early math skills, social development, peer relations, physical development, and enhanced sense of agency, many caregivers (parents, grandparents, guardians, nannies, and babysitters) are not aware of the benefits, especially when it comes to free play.

In 1997, the KidsQuest Children’s Museum was established and sometime after, the education department created PlayGuides for their exhibit. These pamphlets were made to inform caregivers about what their child was learning in that exhibit and what they, as the caregiver, can do to help their child’s development both in the museum and in the home. In 2017, KidsQuest moved to their new location with an entirely new set of exhibits making the earlier PlayGuides obsolete. This study was conducted with the intention of using the information gathered to create a set of nine PlayGuides for KidsQuest’s new exhibits. Specifically, the goals of this study were to find out 1) caregivers’ likes and dislikes about KidsQuest Children’s Museum, 2) children’s preferences at KidsQuest, and 3) average demographics of KidsQuest’s members.

Methods

There were two separate studies done for this project, one online and one in-person. The in-person interviews happened on two different mornings, Thursday 12/11/25 and Saturday 12/13/25 between 10am-1pm. This study consisted of thirty-five caregivers: five nannies or babysitters, and thirty parents. At each exhibit, the number of children playing in the exhibit were counted and then 1-2 caregivers were chosen randomly to be interviewed for an average of 10 minutes each time. There were five questions that were asked:

1. What is your child's favorite exhibit in the museum? -or- Where do they spend the most time?
2. Do you think your child is learning here or is this more for entertainment?
3. What brought you to the museum today?
4. What do you enjoy, as a parent, about this exhibit?
5. What do you enjoy, as a parent, most about the museum as a whole?

The third question (what brought you to the museum today?) was dropped after the first day due to it being superfluous and sometimes coming off as accusatory. A copy of the document used to take notes during the interviews is in Appendix 1.

The online study was done through GoogleForms which was then sent out to the KidsQuest membership list on 12/01/25. 144 members responded between 12/09/25 and 01/06/26. All questions were optional and many of them were multiple choice. Most of the multiple-choice questions were set up to receive multiple responses. Not all questions received 144 responses, the questions and how many people responded to each question are as follows:

1. How many children do you have in your household? (139 responses)
2. What are your kids' ages? (144 responses)
3. What languages are spoken at home and at school? (144 responses)
4. What holidays do you celebrate at home? (142 responses)
5. How does your child(ren) play most often? (144 responses)
6. How often do you come to KidsQuest (143 responses)
7. Where does your child spend the most time at the museum? (144 responses)
8. Have you ever participated in a program at KidsQuest? (139 responses)

9. If you've participated in a program, how did you hear about this program? (74 responses)

A copy of the full form can be found in Appendix 2.

Results

The in-person study showed what were the most popular exhibits for the children, why caregivers brought their child to the museum, and if the caregiver believed learning was happening in that exhibit.

In-Person Results

Children's favorite exhibits

To find which exhibits children preferred, there were two different graphics measured, the number of children counted at each exhibit (Figure 1), and by asking caregivers what their child's favorite exhibit was, or which exhibit their child spent the most time at (Figure 2). Over both days, 202 children were counted at KidsQuest. The point of this count was more to understand the popularity of each exhibit instead of doing a formal headcount, so it is possible that some children were double counted. Only three children were seen at Sticks + Stones, most likely because Sticks + Stones is the outdoor exhibit and the count was done in December. If the count was done again in the summer, it is possible the count would be different. Additionally, none of the children mentioned Sticks + Stones as their favorite exhibit which might have also been affected by the weather. It is possible that the audience would be more interested in an outdoor exhibit in the summer. Of the 202 children counted at KidsQuest, the most were found at CityScapes (42), Bellevue Mercantile (31), and the Tot Orchard (31). Other than Sticks + Stones, the least number of children were found at the Art Studio (11), the Water exhibit (19), and the Atrium Climber (19). However, when asked about what their favorite exhibit is, the Water exhibit, and On the Go tied for first (7), with CityScapes and the Atrium Climber in second (6). While CityScapes is to be expected, having Water and the Atrium Climber favored by many children is an interesting case. It is possible that, despite being inside, the cold weather made the Water exhibit less appealing in the moment although still being seen as a fun activity at other times. It is also possible that the Water exhibit is one caregivers choose to do right before leaving

in case their child's clothes get wet and since most of the interviews happened soon after opening, there were not as many children as there would have been later in the day. This lines up with the information gathered through the form (Figure 5), as the caregivers surveyed also listed the Water exhibit and On the Go as one of their child's favorite exhibits. However, the Atrium Climber was in the bottom 50% of favorite exhibits which conflicts with the findings from the interviews but not with the findings from the counting. Due to these differences in data, it is not clear what data accurately reflects the experience of visitors.

Figure 1 : Number of children at each exhibit (Total: 202)

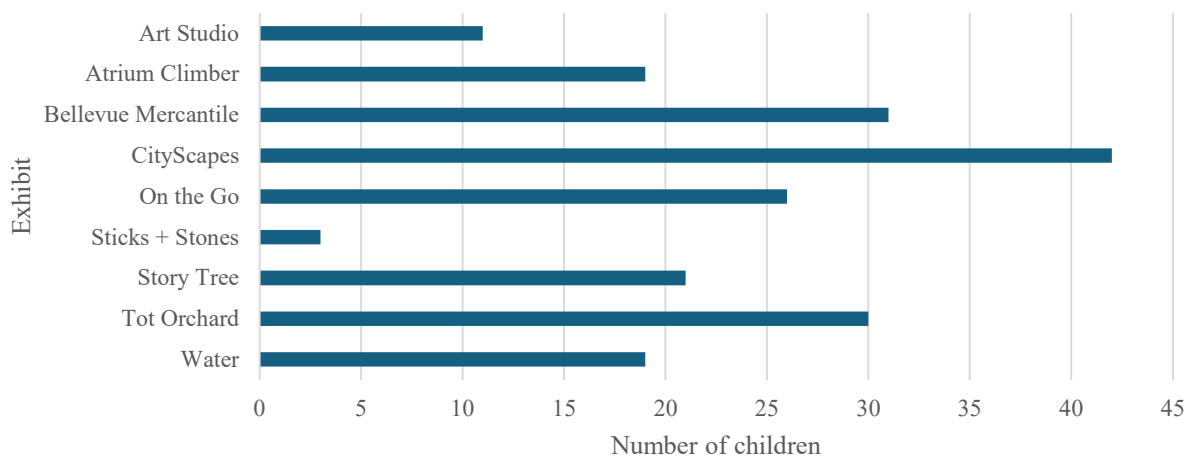
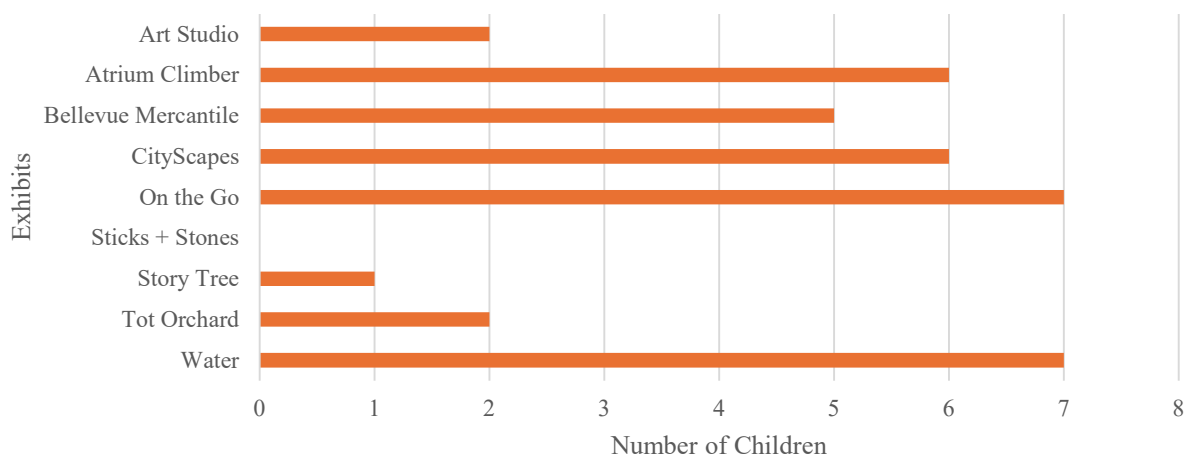


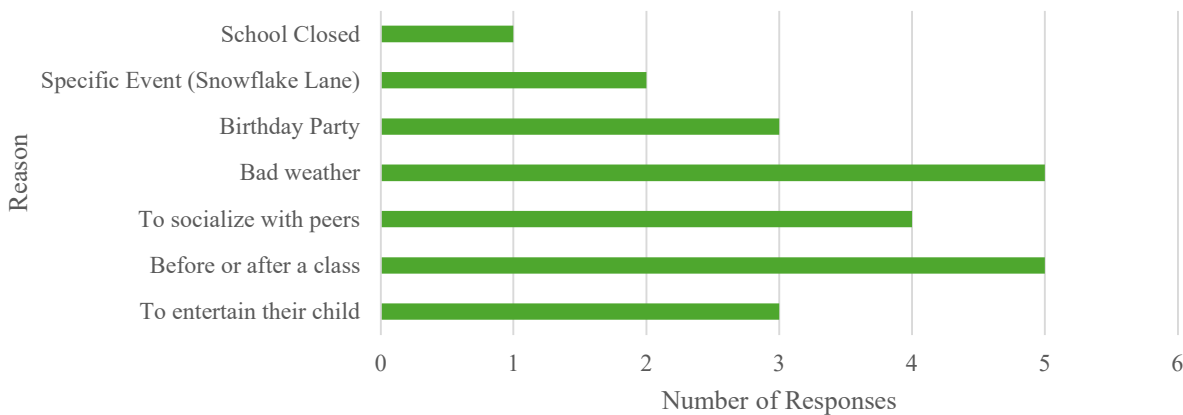
Figure 2 : Children's favorite exhibits (Total: 36)



Thought of Interviewed Caregivers on KidsQuest and Children's Learning

The other four interview questions were about the caregiver's views of KidsQuest. The question "what brought you to the museum today?" was removed before the conclusion of the evaluation and so has fewer responses (23) than the other questions (Figure 3). Many caregivers allowed their child to play in the museum before or after a class held at the museum (5). The other top reasons were to allow their child to socialize and because the weather was too bad to play outside but they still wanted their child to be active.

Figure 3 : Reasons caregivers brought their child to KidsQuest
(Total: 23)



The question "what do you like about KidsQuest?" (Table 1) or "what do you like about this exhibit?" (Table 2) provided a variety of answers. The most common answer when asked about KidsQuest as a whole was the variety of activities for their child to participate in. Caregivers also appreciated having a safe space where they could watch their children play. Several people interviewed mentioned that most often when their children play, such as at daycare or school, they are unable to see how their child interacts with their peers. As such, they enjoy that at KidsQuest, they can observe their child's behavior in a neutral environment. Many caregivers also said they like KidsQuest because it is a place where their child can get messy, wet, and/or dirty and they [the caregiver] do not have to worry about cleaning up water, paint, or another messy substance. Some answers that caregivers gave that did not fall into one of these

categories include: the lack of screens, that the museum was Washington-centric, and that KidsQuest provides a dry place to play during the common rainy weather (Table 1.5).

Table 1 : Respondents favorite part of KidsQuest

Responses	Number of respondents
Can get messy	2
Safety	5
Watching them play	4
Variety	12
Lots of Space	2

Table 1.5 : Respondents favorite part of KidsQuest

Responses
The Water exhibit
Adult-like spaces for kids (Bellevue Mercantile, Art Studio, On the Go, etc.)
Washington state centric
Classes offered
Allows kids to be away from screens
Hands-on
Dry Place to Play
Social

When it came to what caregivers like specifically about the exhibit they were in, around 65% of the answers fell into one of four categories, similarly to what they liked about the museum as a whole (Table 2). The answers outside of those four categories were often more exhibit specific such as “athleticism” for the Atrium Climber. One caregiver mentioned sensory swings that used to be at the Story Tree but were no longer there. At the Tot Orchard, caregivers also mentioned liking how accessible everything was for their toddler, and how the room was very tactile (Table 2.5).

Table 2 : Respondents favorite part of exhibit

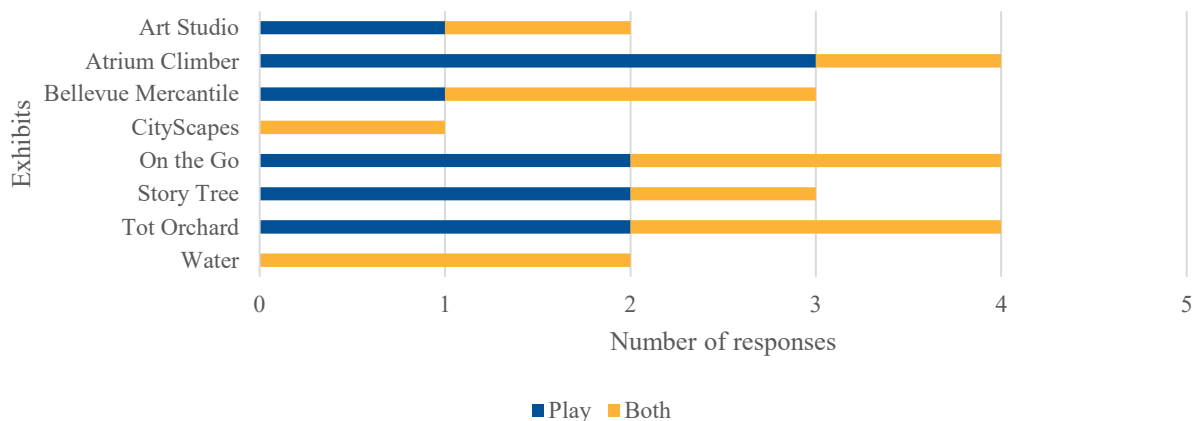
Categories	Exhibits
Can get messy	Art Studio; Water
Safety	Atrium Climber*; CityScapes; Tot Orchard*
Learning	Bellevue Mercantile; On the Go; Tot Orchard; Story Tree
Variety	CityScapes*

Table 2.5 : Respondents favorite part of exhibit

Exhibits	Responses
Atrium Climber	Climbed to the top, got scared and kept going; good for rainy days; athleticism
Tot Orchard	Tactile; Accessibility
Story Tree	Sensory Swings

Most interesting for this project was the answer to the question “do you think your child is more playing or more learning here?” None of the caregivers responded with “mostly learning,” about half responded with “mostly playing” and about half responded with “both” (Figure 4). Five caregivers included what they thought their child was learning while playing as well. At the Art Studio, one caregiver with two children said that their child who was doing a paint experiment involving rubber bands was learning, while the other child who was painting with a paintbrush was more playing. At the Bellevue Mercantile, one caregiver mentioned “hand-eye coordination” while another said their child was learning how to sort and how to share.

Figure 4 : Caregiver's indication on whether their child was playing or playing and learning (Total: 23)



Online form results

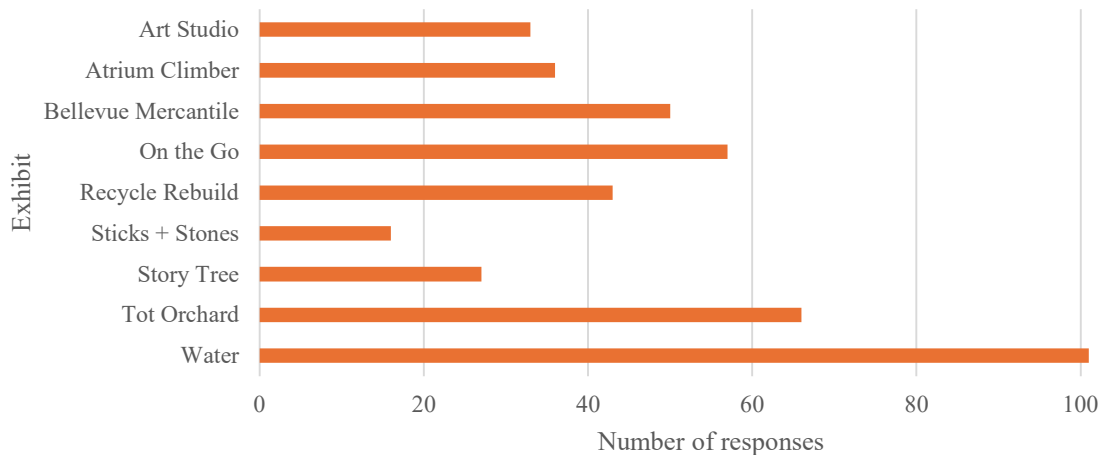
The results for the online study is into two sections, “Home” (demographic information and how the child plays at home” and “KidsQuest” (how often the family visits KidsQuest, favorite exhibit, etc.).

KidsQuest

As discussed in the previous section, the answers to the question “where does your child spend the most time at the museum?” were similar on the form, but not the same (Figure 5). The Water exhibit and On the Go were both in the top three but Tot Orchard was also high up on the

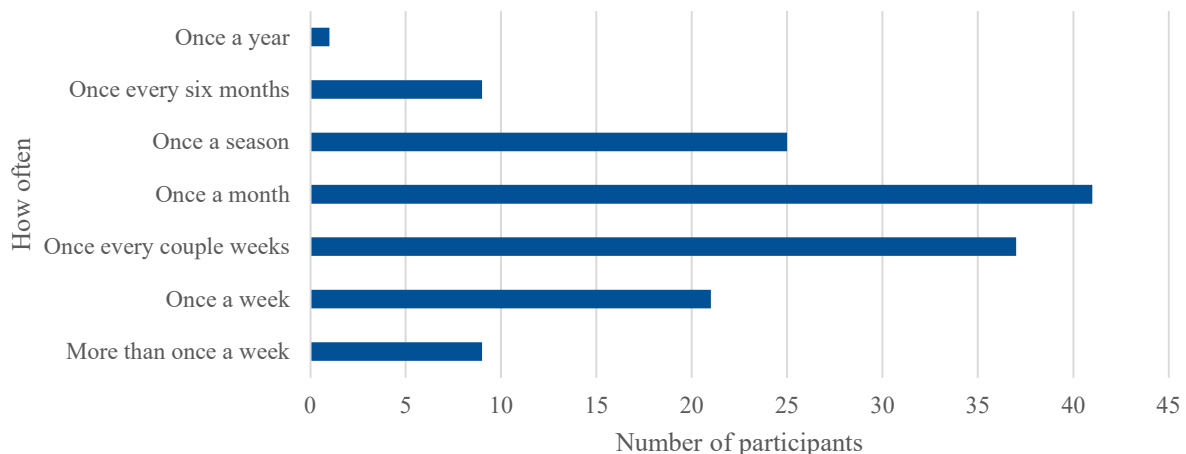
form. This might be because most of the respondents had toddler-aged children (Figure 10) and so the results were skewed towards the toddler-aged exhibit. The ages of the children in the in-person interviews were more varied.

Figure 5 : Children's favorite exhibits (Total: 429)



For the question “how often do you visit KidsQuest?”, the answers may be skewed towards families that visit more often since the form was sent out to members of the museum. Most families visit KidsQuest about once or twice a month (Figure 6).

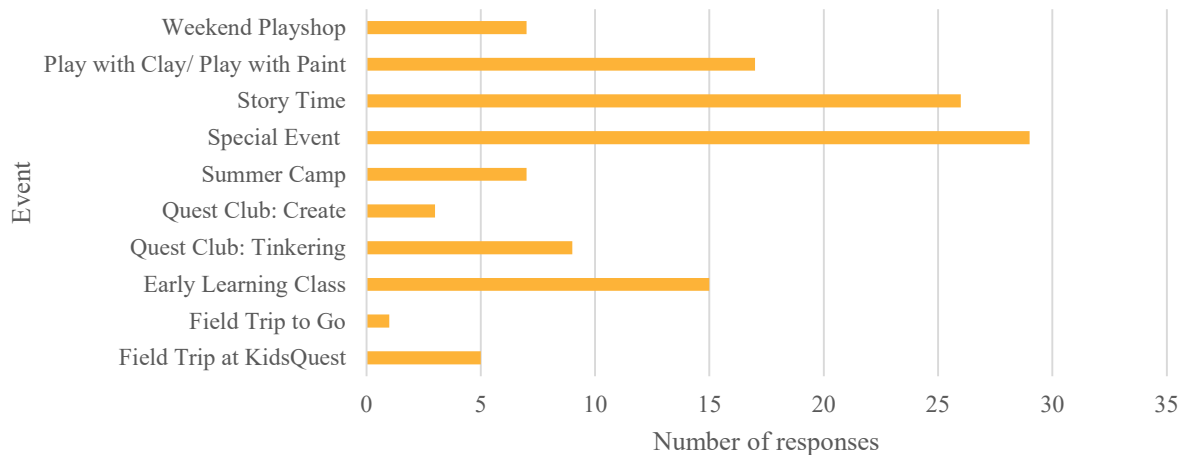
Figure 6 : How often participants visit KidsQuest (Total: 143)



When asked “have you attended any events at KidsQuest?” (Figure 7), sixty-three people responded that they had attended at least one event. The most common events were special

events such as Snowflake Lane or the Gingerbread Workshops and Story Time. Only one family responded to having used the Field Trip to Go and only five families responded having had a child do a field trip at KidsQuest.

Figure 7 : Events participants engaged in (Total: 63)



For the respondents who had attended an event at KidsQuest, the next question was “where did you hear about the event?” (Table 3). The majority of people responded that they heard about the event through the KidsQuest membership email list or a recommendation by a family or friend. A couple of people heard about an event once they were already at KidsQuest and heard the announcement over the intercom.

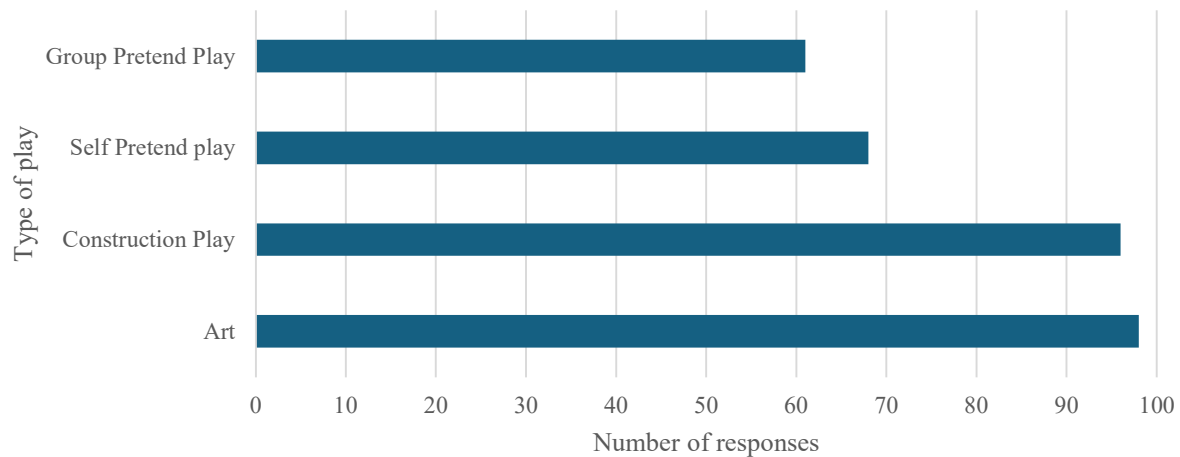
Table 3 : How respondents found out about events

Responses	Number of respondents
KidsQuest Membership email list	54
Newspaper or newsletter not associated with KidsQuest	2
Friend or family member recommendation	11
Search Engine	4
KidsQuest Website	2
Preschool	1
Announcement in KidsQuest	3

At Home

The top four categories of play caregivers said were their child’s favorite were art, construction play, pretend play by themselves, and pretend play with peers (Figure 8).

Figure 8 : Top ways participant's children play (Total: 144)



142 out of 144 respondents said one of the top ways their child likes to play was one of these four categories. The other responses are in Table 4, items that are starred(*) are ones that caregivers wrote in for the “other” category. Puzzles, toys that children can move with their arms and/or legs, board games, and educational video games were also included in children’s top favorites.

Table 4 : Ways children prefer to play

Responses	Number of respondents
Puzzles	36
Toys the move arms/ legs	34
Board games	24
Educational video games	24
Puzzle games	18
Team sports	18
Non-educational video games	14
Cars, trucks, and trains	7
Books*	2
STEM Kits*	1
Swinging*	1
Music*	1
Climbing*	1
Playing in/ with water*	1

Answers to the questions, “how many children do you have?”, “what are the ages of your children?” “what languages are spoken at home?”, and “what holidays do you celebrate?” all relate to the demographic information for the families who responded.

Most families had one to two children (Figure 9) with about 14% of families having more than three children. Most of these children were younger than five with 75% of children in respondents' families being in kindergarten or younger (Figure 10). About 5% of families had at least one child who were considered older by KidsQuest standards (10+).

Figure 9 : Number of children per household (Total: 139)

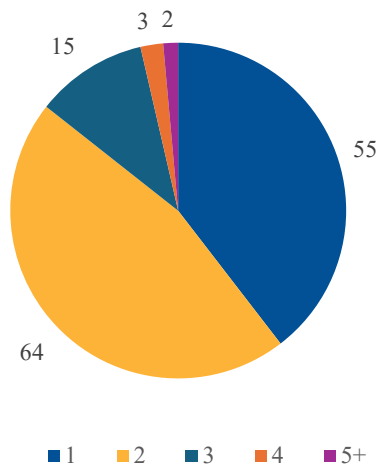
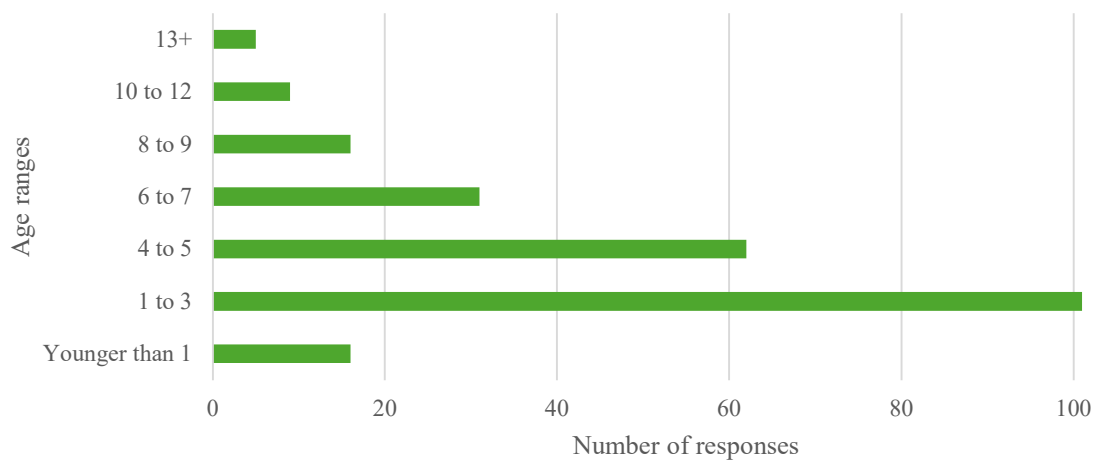


Figure 10 : Ages of children of members (Total: 240)



Of the languages spoken at home, 132 respondents said they spoke English. Since the form was only offered in English, it is possible that the other twelve respondents were unsure of the question or did not notice English as an option. However, with current language translation technologies, it is also possible that a respondent was able to read the form in a language other

than English. 50% of respondents (72) labeled English as the only language spoken in the home while the other 50% included at least one other language. The languages other than English are written in Table 5, all the languages with a star(*) next to them were written in by the respondent.

Table 5 : Languages spoken by respondents	
Responses	Number of respondents
Mandarin Chinese	22
Spanish	14
Hindi	7
Cantonese	6
Russian	5
French	4
Japanese	4
Arabic	3
Vietnamese*	3
Portuguese*	2
Taiwanese Min-Nan	2
American Sign Language	1
Azerbaijani*	1
Bengali*	1
Danish*	1
Farsi*	1
Filipino*	1
Gujarati*	1
Hebrew	1
Kannada*	1
Konkani*	1
Marathi*	1
Olelo*	1
Persian*	1
Romanian*	1
Tamil*	1
Ukranian	1
Urdu*	1
Korean	0

Seventeen holidays were included on the form, and respondents included twelve more holidays in the “other” section, those with a star(*) on Table 6. The five most common holidays were Christmas, New Year’s Eve/ Day, Halloween, Valentine’s Day, and Easter. Over 50% of respondents celebrate each of these holidays. Less than 50% of respondents celebrate the other holidays listed. While Lunar New Year was an option to pick, two different respondents wrote in “Chinese New Year” and “Other Lunar Year Celebrations” so these were included as separate responses on the table.

Table 6 : Holidays celebrated by respondents

Responses	Number of respondents
Christmas	132
New Year's Eve/ Day	128
Halloween	123
Valentine's Day	93
Easter	93
St. Patrick's Day	40
Lunar New Year	36
Cinco de Mayo	21
Juneteeth	21
Diwali	14
Passover	13
Hanukkah	13
Holi	9
Ramadan	8
Jewish High Holidays	7
Eid al-Fitr	7
Purim	5
Thanksgiving*	4
Solstices/ Equinoxes*	3
Mid-Autumn Festival*	3
4th of July*	3
Dia de los Reyes*	1
Dia de los muertos*	1
Mother/Father's Day (U.S.)*	1
Mother/Father's Day (Mexico)*	1
St Nicholas*	1
St John*	1
Chinese New Year*	1
Other Lunar Year Celebrations*	1

Conclusion

The results from the in-person interviews and the online form had different questions but both give an important overview of the families that go to KidsQuest. Caregivers appreciate KidsQuest as a place for their child to engage in play. Where they know their child will be safe and that they do not have to closely supervise. While some caregivers appreciate KidsQuest as a place where their child can learn new things, many are looking for a place where their child can play. Around half of the families who come through recognize the importance of play for their child but do not know that their child is also learning while doing so. While more studies would have to be conducted to confirm it is possible that parents believe that play is important because it allows their child to relax from learning. Helping caregivers understand that play and learning are not mutually exclusive could benefit both them and their children. With that reframing, they may become more open to recognizing the educational value already present in their child's play and include more play in their learning at home.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: In-Person Interview Questions

1. What is your child's favorite exhibit in the museum? -or- Where do they spend the most time?
 - a. Art Studio
 - b. Atrium Climber
 - c. Bellevue Mercantile
 - d. Story Tree
 - e. Sticks + Stones
 - f. Tot Orchard
 - g. Water
 - h. Recycle Rebuild
 - i. On the Go
 - j. Trains/ CityScapes
2. Do you think your child is learning here or is this more for entertainment?
 - a. Art Studio
 - b. Atrium Climber
 - c. Bellevue Mercantile
 - d. Story Tree
 - e. Sticks and Stones
 - f. Tot Orchard
 - g. Water
 - h. Recycle Rebuild
 - i. On the Go
3. What brought you to the museum today?
 - a. Entertainment
 - b. Learning
 - c. Distraction

- d. Socializing
 - e. Other
4. What do you enjoy, as a parent, about this exhibit?
 5. What do you enjoy, as a parent, most about the museum as a whole?

Appendix 2: Online Form Questions

1. How many children do you have in your household?

- a. 1
- b. 2
- c. 3
- d. 4
- e. 5+

2. What are your kids' ages?

- a. Less than 1
- b. 1-3
- c. 4-5
- d. 6-7
- e. 8-9
- f. 10-12
- g. 13+

3. What languages are spoken at home and at school?

- a. Arabic
- b. Cantonese
- c. English
- d. French
- e. Hebrew
- f. Hindi
- g. Japanese
- h. Korean
- i. Mandarin Chinese
- j. Russian
- k. Spanish
- l. Taiwanese Min-Nan
- m. Ukrainian
- n. Other _____

4. What holidays do you celebrate at home?

- a. New Year's Eve/ Day
 - b. Lunar New Year
 - c. Valentine's Day
 - d. Purim
 - e. Ramadan
 - f. Eid al-Fitr
 - g. Holi
 - h. St. Patrick's Day
 - i. Easter
 - j. Passover
 - k. Cinco de Mayo
 - l. Juneteenth
 - m. Jewish High Holidays (Rosh Hashanah/ Yom Kippur/ Sukkot/ Etc.)
 - n. Diwali
 - o. Halloween
 - p. Hanukkah
 - q. Christmas
 - r. Other _____
5. How does your child(ren) play most often? Mark the top 3 choices.
- a. Puzzles
 - b. Puzzle Games i.e., mazes, connect the dots, etc.
 - c. Board Games
 - d. Construction play (blocks, Legos)
 - e. Art i.e., painting, drawing with crayons or pencils
 - f. Education-oriented technology play (educational video games)
 - g. Non-education-oriented video games
 - h. Team sports
 - i. Toys that move arms/legs
 - j. Pretend play/ fantasy play by themselves
 - k. Pretend play/ fantasy play with others
 - l. Other _____

6. How often do you come to KidsQuest
 - a. More than once a week
 - b. Once a week
 - c. Once every couple weeks
 - d. Once a month
 - e. Once a season
 - f. Once every six months
 - g. Once a year
 - h. Less than once a year
7. Where does your child spend the most time at the museum?
 - a. Art Studio
 - b. Atrium Climber
 - c. Bellevue Mercantile
 - d. On the Go
 - e. Recycle Rebuild
 - f. Sticks + Stones
 - g. Story Tree
 - h. Tot Orchard
 - i. Water
8. Have you ever participated in a program at KidsQuest?
 - a. Field Trip @ KidsQuest
 - b. Field Trips to Go
 - c. Early Learning Class
 - d. Quest Club: Tinkering
 - e. Quest Club: Create
 - f. Summer Camp
 - g. Special Event (i.e., Gingerbread Workshops or KidsQuest Summer Nights)
 - h. Story Time
 - i. Play with Clay/ Play with Paint
 - j. Weekend Playshop
 - k. No, I haven't participated in any programs

9. If you've participated in a program, how did you hear about this program?
- a. KidsQuest Membership Email List
 - b. Newspaper or newsletter not associated with KidsQuest
 - c. Friend/Family recommendation
 - d. Search Engine
 - e. Other _____

Deliverable 2: Play Guides

Art Studio- At the Art Studio, children, adults, and visiting artists create their own masterpieces using traditional art practices. Here they draw, paint, collage, or make ceramic pieces that are fired on-site. Children learn how to communicate emotions through art and how to solve problems while working on their fine motor skills.

- **Telling a Story:** Art is an effective way for children to express their ideas, interests, and identities. Children learn how to process their emotions and thoughts in the safe environment of the Art Studio by creating and discussing their art.
- **Perseverance and problem solving:** When children encounter challenges while making art, they need to practice thinking creatively to find solutions. The problem-solving skills they build here carry over into everyday challenges.
- **Color & Texture Exploration:** New sensory experiences are important for children to connect with their world in meaningful ways. Children learn how to use their senses to understand and evaluate these unfamiliar experiences. Categorization skills help children recognize patterns, similarities, and differences between objects, as well as organize these objects into like groups. These skills provide the groundwork for later math concepts.
- **Using their hands:** When making art, children exercise fine motor skills such as grasping, pinching, and controlled finger movements. These skills are essential for manipulating tools and materials with precision. Practicing these movements help support everyday tasks such as handwriting, cutting with scissors, tying shoelaces, and picking up small objects.
- **Being Creative:** Creating imaginative works of art helps children develop the ability to perceive and express the visual world creatively. This skill is valuable as they grow, helping them articulate their own ideas and engage more thoughtfully with the ideas of others.
- **For toddlers:** Younger siblings are welcome to join us at the Art Studio. This is a space for children of all ages to practice their fine motor skills and explore new sensory experiences while creating wonderful works of art.
- **For Caregivers:**
 - **At KidsQuest**
 - **For social development:** Encourage your child to share materials and tools with others while creating their art piece. When the art is done, talk to your child and one of their friends about their thoughts on the artwork to get them talking about each others' work.
 - **For language development:** Use open-ended language such as “tell me about your creation” to help your child develop their vocabulary.

- For self-confidence: If your child becomes frustrated during the art-making process, reassure them that accidents are a natural part of the creative process. Ask them “how can we take this surprise and turn it into something you like?”
- At Home Activity: Try making your own stamps using washable paint along with items from outside or around the house. Paint one side of the item and press it onto a piece of paper to see what kind of picture it makes. Some items that work well as stamps are foods like apples or potatoes, or outdoor items like leaves or pinecones.

Atrium Climber- The Atrium Climber is a two-story work of art that encourages safe risk-taking. Here, children learn that their actions may lead to unintended results without fear of injury. They are invited to explore and develop their fine and gross motor skills, practice emotional regulation, and understand how their bodies move through space.

- **Climbing:** The Atrium Climber provides a variety of ways for children to move their body. Children use their upper body strength to ascend through the Atrium and they use balance to descend. Climbing helps children build muscle strength and develop their bodies.
- **Navigating:** Children use trial and error to learn how their body interacts with the space around them. As they develop their spatial awareness, children improve their ability to control their body as they become more confident in themselves.
- **Planning:** Children practice setting goals and making decisions as they plan how they are going to climb in the Atrium. As children decide how to climb the structure and navigate from place to place, they are building memory, focus, and forward thinking skills.
- **Making Friends:** Some children learn best from observing others. They learn both how to climb through the Atrium as well as how to regulate and express their emotions through observing their peers. Children also learn how to cooperate with others as they navigate the space with other children.
- **For younger children:** Toddlers are also learning how to climb, navigate, and socialize and should have a safe and age-appropriate space to do so. The Tot Tower is for smaller children who may need a calmer space to learn.
- **For Caregivers:**
 - **At KidsQuest:** If your child is apprehensive at first, invite them to explore just the lower levels of the climber at first. Children are usually good at sizing up a challenge and knowing their own limits.
 - **For emotional development:** Show empathy and understanding if your child feels scared or realizes they are not ready to climb all the way to the top. Let them know they can always try again on your next visit.
 - **For language development:** Use physical cues when introducing new words to your child. For younger children, say “up”, “down”, “across”, “left”, “right”, “over”, and “under” as you point. For older children, both literal language like “ascend”, “descend”, and nonliteral language like “sky-high” or “in the clouds” helps them to grow their vocabulary.
 - **At Home Activity:** Encourage your child to talk to you about what they were feeling while they were climbing. Use both physical feelings (were the ropes soft or rough? Do any of your muscles ache?) and emotional feelings (how did it feel when you were at the top? Scary or exciting?). Reflecting on how they felt during the experience helps children learn about themselves.

Bellevue Mercantile- The Bellevue Mercantile provides the familiar settings of a store and a farm with added historical details that enrich imaginative play. Working at the store, children explore history and math concepts, while working with the animals at the farm helps them to develop empathy and responsibility.

- **Playing with the Animals:** Imaginary play allows children to experiment with different social roles, such as a farmer or a store-owner, in an imaginary space. Pretend play creates a safe space that allows children to create their own problems and figure out solutions. Even when they know the situation is pretend, children are still developing empathy and curiosity about others' lives and cultures.
- **Sorting and Organizing:** When children sort and organize at the Mercantile, they are learning how to identify patterns in objects. Children learn how to tell when an object is different or the same as another object and how to group similar items together, building early math skills.
- **Stacking & Matching:** While play teaches children lots of important skills, cleaning up is also educational. Children learn more about identifying patterns as they sort items into their proper categories and learn about balance and gravity when they stack items on each other. Children also learn about the importance of being responsible for the space they play in, even when that place is not their home.
- **Weighing:** Children practice their math skills when they weigh items and learn how to balance the weights. They are also learning about how simple machines such as the pulley and the wheel and axle work.
- **Playing with others:** When children play with their peers, they learn important social skills such as understanding and responding to how others' are feeling. Pretend play also encourages children to adapt how they communicate depending on who they are talking to.
- **For younger siblings:** Toddlers and younger children can have many new sensory experiences at the Cow Wash such as using air hoses and brushes on the cow's fur. They also develop their gross and fine motor skills as they learn to hold and maneuver the tools, or simply pet the cow. Beyond the sensory and physical benefits, children also gain a sense of responsibility and empathy as they practice caring for another living creature.
- **For Caregivers**
 - **At KidsQuest**
 - **For cognitive development:** Ask your child if anything in the store reminds them of other experiences. Teach them that some items in the Mercantile, such as the cash register and the scales, can be found at your local grocery store, even if they look different.
 - **For Independence:** Take cues from your child on how they want you to join their play. Do they want you to be the cashier, the customer, or the farmer? Would they prefer to play alone? Letting them make choices about

their experience helps them recognize their own preferences and build confidence in expressing them.

- For social development: Invite your child to take on roles to learn to see from the perspective of others. Ask them, “does being a grocer or a farmer sound like a lot of work?” This helps them develop empathy for others who have different experiences than they do.
- At Home Activity: Invite your child to help with the cooking. For younger children, ask them to help you count scoops or weigh ingredients to develop early math skills. Older children can work on their fine motor skills and responsibility by helping to put food away or by learning how to safely cut fruits and vegetables.

CityScapes- The activities in CityScapes encourage children to collaborate, plan, and construct with the blocks and tools around them. Children practice their communication skills, learn about engineering, and work on their problem-solving skills.

- Building with blocks: Building and balancing blocks helps children work on their ability to identify problems and come up with solutions. Identifying types of shapes and how different shapes work together to create a structure helps them to work on their math skills.
- Playing with trains: Imaginative play helps children develop their vocabulary, empathy, creativity, and awareness of themselves and others. Children learn how to communicate their wants, needs, and emotions with others in a safe environment by pretending to be someone else. They also learn about what someone else might want or need, making them more attuned to others' feelings.
- Building train routes: When children plan the routes their train will take, they are working on their problem solving skills. When they say these thoughts out loud, they also learn how to express their ideas creatively.
- Playing with others: Children are able to work independently or as a team while building with blocks, and at the train table. When they work together, children learn how to communicate their ideas while also becoming more aware of others' moods and intentions.
- For younger children: Toddlers are welcome to join their older siblings here. The train table in the Tot Orchard offers a quieter, more age-appropriate space if needed.
- For Caregivers
 - At KidsQuest
 - For cognitive development: If your child is passionate about construction, encourage them to learn more about it. Across from the train table is the Construction and Demolition Screens which show how three different buildings were built and taken down for those interested.
 - For critical thinking skills: Use a problem-solving process to help your child come up with solutions when they feel stuck or frustrated. First, state the problem and have your child come up with as many ideas as they can. Record all ideas without judgement. Go over the solutions with your child and ask them to reflect about whether it would work for them and the people around them. Pick one to try and try it out together.
 - At Home Activity: Give your child toothpicks and marshmallows to make a tower. As your child learns how to make a tower stable, they work on their math skills and problem-solving skills. Playdough or clay can also work to stick the toothpicks together.

On the Go- On the Go provides a range of opportunities for problem-solving, making friends, and working on their fine motor skills. Children use their muscles to move the conveyor belts around the room or use their imagination while playing in the Big Rig. They can also explore, engineer, and try new things.

- **Playing Pretend:** Through pretend play, children work with others to make up games and work out the rules. This teaches them how to set boundaries in a kind and respectful way and how to respect others' boundaries as well.
- **Turning a Wheel:** Children use their hands (fine motor skills) and strength (gross motor skills) to turn the wheel and move the conveyor belts. They are also learning that their energy can power other things through handles, gears, and cogs.
- **Cooperation:** Cooperative play encourages children to work together toward a shared goal. In doing so, they practice communicating, negotiating, and problem-solving with others.
- **Observing others:** Children learn so many things by watching the world around them. Even before they start interacting with the space, children are learning how the machines work and picking up new words naturally as they play. Children also watch other children to learn how to interact with the different machines and each other.
- **For toddlers:** Some wheels may be hard for your child to turn by themselves. Try turning the wheel together to see the conveyor belt in action.
- **For Caregivers**
 - **At KidsQuest:**
 - **For science skills:** Talk to your child about the science of flight. Explain how wing size and shape affect an airplane's performance: smaller planes have less "drag" and will fly faster while larger wings give the plane more lift and let it fly farther. Test out these ideas by folding different types of airplanes.
 - **For language:** Help build your child's language skills by encouraging them to create a story to go along with their time in the Big Rig. As they tell their story, introduce new vocabulary related to the things around them, such as "steering wheel", "dial", and "map".
 - **For problem solving:** Next to the Big Rig is the Colorful Car Case. Work with your child to create a custom track and then test it out with one of the cars. How far can you go? Through trial and error, can you make the car go farther than before?
 - **At Home Activity:** Set up a paper airplane testing zone at your house. Using a ruler or yardstick, tape off foot-long increments down a hallway. Standing at one end, have your child throw a paper airplane and measure how far it flies. There are lots of books and online resources that teach how to fold a paper airplane or

just have your child experiment with their own ideas. Have them try different ways of folding to see what makes it go the farthest.

Sticks + Stones- Our outdoor gallery connects children to the natural world through water play, making music, art, and imaginative play. Children get hands-on experiences playing with wood, rocks, and water while learning about math, science, and problem solving.

- Climbing: When children climb on our outdoor playground, they are developing the connection between their body and brain. They are also becoming more aware of how their body moves through space. Children also become more confident in their strength and motor skills the more they get to climb around.
- Playing Instruments: Playing musical instruments teaches children coordination and helps them work on their fine motor skills as they strike, pluck, and play the instruments to keep the beat. As they count the beats and discover patterns, children also work on their math skills.
- Sensory Play: When children have new sensory experiences, they learn the vocabulary related to those experiences. Children who have the vocabulary to describe what is going on around them are better able to communicate their needs and emotions. This also helps them to regulate their emotions as they practice responding to new experiences in a safe setting.
- Stacking: Children discover how weight and balance work as they experiment with different ways to build a stable stack of stones or wooden pieces. As they explore different ways to create balanced stacks of different sizes, children learn how to adapt their ideas for different situations.
- Creating: Creative play allows children to learn how to take risks, experiment, and test boundaries in a safe, supportive environment. Children learn that mistakes are a natural part of learning and gain confidence each time they work through a challenge.
- For younger siblings: Children of all ages are welcome at Sticks + Stones. The blocks in the Imagination Playground may be especially good for toddlers practicing their walking and grasping skills.
- For Caregivers
 - At KidsQuest
 - For independence: Pay attention to what your child gravitates towards. Do they want to climb on the Imagination Playground? Do they want you to join them at the Activity Tables? Letting them lead the way builds confidence in their own decision-making.
 - For vocabulary building: Introduce your child to words found in the Sticks + Stones exhibit. One example is a “cairn”, the term for a stack of stones.
 - For math skills: At the “Build a Cairn” station, invite your child to count the rocks as you stack them. When the tower falls, encourage them to try building a tower with even more rocks the next time.
 - At Home Activity: Try sunscreen painting. Have your child paint a picture using sunscreen on a piece of black paper then put the paper in the sun. The paper

should lighten while the place that has sunscreen will stay dark. With this activity, children discover how their actions affect the world around them, work on their fine motor skills, and learn how sunlight interacts with different materials.

Story Tree- The activities in this space immerse children in the creation and sharing of stories as they build reading and writing skills. Children can read, play, act, and explore other ways to bring their stories to life.

- Exploring Books: Even before they can read, children are exposed to language through writing all around them. From street signs to food packages, children are learning how the written language works and building the skills they need to read and write their stories.
- Acting: Also known as pretend play, children love to act out roles they observe adults doing. Children play like this to learn how to interact and communicate with others and with their environment.
- Listening to a Story: Every word that your child hears and repeats becomes the building blocks of literacy. Together, these blocks become their vocabulary. A wide variety of stories leads to a broader, more diverse vocabulary.
- Talking: Children need the chance to practice what they learn. Talking about what they see teaches children how to use their new vocabulary, how to tell a story, and other communication skills.
- Playing with others: When your child plays with other children, they develop important skills like cooperation and compromise while also learning how to express their needs. Dress-up and pretend play with others exposes children to words and phrases they would not typically use in everyday conversation, and helps them learn how to build and follow the rules of imaginative play.
- For younger children: Board books are an excellent introduction to literacy for toddlers. Telling them stories and responding to their vocalizations are also great ways to develop their language skills.
- For Caregivers:
 - At KidsQuest:
 - For language: Asking your child “who are you pretending to be?” or “would you like to put on a show?” invites them to work on their communication skills by talking about their thoughts and feelings.
 - For literacy: Reading to your child is the best way to teach them how to read. The Story Tree Library has a collection of classic fairy tales and newly published stories that can provide important reading practice, whether you are reading aloud or your child is practicing on their own.
 - For emotional development: When reading a story with your child, ask them “what do you think this character is feeling?” Thinking about and discussing other people’s feelings helps your child develop empathy for others while also gaining a better understanding of their own emotions.
 - At Home Activity: Mad Libs are an entertaining and creative way to introduce children about how different types of words work together. Here is one to get you

started: “I [verb with an -ed ending] all the way to KidsQuest when I heard they have [noun] at their new exhibit [noun] [plant]. I can’t wait to [verb] there!”

Tot Orchard- The Tot Orchard is a safe, engaging, and social environment for toddlers to explore, play, and learn about the world around them.

- **Moving:** Crawling, toddling, riding, pulling, pushing, lifting, and climbing all build strength and balance while also helping your child understand how their body moves through their space.
- **Gathering:** Gathering apples in the Orchard Trees or plastic food in the Kitchen teaches toddlers how to think creatively to solve problems. When your child encounters a problem (How can I fit all these apples in my hands?), they learn how to come up with and test their solutions. As they encounter new challenges and learn how to solve them, your child gains more confidence in themselves and their abilities.
- **Dumping:** When your toddler tips toys on the ground, or knocks two items together, they learn that their actions have consequences. Learning about cause and effect is an important early skill for your toddler.
- **Watching and Imitating:** Your toddler learns how to behave and communicate by watching everyone around them. This includes their friends, their family, and unfamiliar adults. Even animals, such as sheep, teach children about the world around them.
- **Sensory Play:** Toddlers use all their senses to explore objects and make sense of the world around them. When your toddler explores new textures, sounds, and materials, they are also developing their vocabulary and improving their memory.
- **For older children:** Older children are welcome in this space and are encouraged to remain mindful of their movements in order to ensure a safe and comfortable environment for all children.
- **For the Caregivers:**
 - **At KidsQuest:**
 - **For language:** Ask your toddler open-ended questions such as “what do you think will happen if we tip the basket over?” or “what should we try next?” Your child can understand and sometimes respond both verbally and through gestures or expressions even before they can talk.
 - **For physical development:** Allow your child to roam the Tot Orchard freely. Even when children bump into walls or corners, they are learning how their body moves through and interacts with the space around them.
 - **For social development:** As soon as your child begins to socialize, they start learning how to negotiate and share with their friends, but they still need your help as they navigate these social situations. Help them learn how to take turns by demonstrating what sharing looks like or redirecting their attention to another activity.
 - **At Home Activity:**

- Help your child work on their fine motor skills by giving them crayons or thick markers to draw with. Giving them clips or clothespins to play with will develop their fine motor skills as well.
- When you are spending time with your toddler, talk through what you are doing as you go to help them pick up new vocabulary naturally.

Water- The Water exhibit invites children to explore engineering, collaboration, and problem-solving through hands-on experimentation. As they play, they learn small changes can have significant and surprising results.

- Collaborative Play: Children work together to construct structures that redirect or dam the flow of water. As they collaborate and communicate to achieve something together they are developing important social skills.
- Repeating Actions: Even before children can talk, they are learning about cause and effect. When your child repeats the same action over and over again (such as throwing a toy), they are figuring out that the same action gets the same results. Encourage your child to drop different objects into the water and observe which items float and which sink.
- Experimenting: Children move pipes, blocks, and funnels to dam the water and create new pathways. Presenting them with a challenge, such as blocking or redirecting the flow of water, encourages creative and flexible thinking.
- Constructing: Children explore how tools like channels, funnels, and water wheels can be used together to direct the flow of water.
- For toddlers: The Tot Splash invites children to feel and explore the water flowing from the faucets. Measuring cups for pouring helps build an understanding of cause and effect while the faucet handles help develop fine motor skills.
- For the Caregivers:
 - At KidsQuest:
 - For language: While your child plays in the water, encourage them to describe the water using as many words as they can. Is it cold or warm? What color is it? Is the water moving very fast or very slow?
 - For cognitive development: Prompt your child to experiment with new materials and new ways of doing things. Ask them: “Can you build something that makes the water flow in this direction?”
 - For social-emotional development: Let your child take the lead and explore the water in whatever ways interests them. This helps them become more confident in their decision-making skills.
 - At Home Activity: Build on what your child explored at the KidsQuest by introducing related concepts like gravity and volume at home
 - Try taking your child outside with a large bucket of water and several containers of different sizes. Allow your child to pour varying amounts of water into and out of each container. This teaches your child early science concepts like volume and capacity.