



PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Making History Together with Integrated Children's Programming

Robyn Reimer

You can teach a student a lesson for a day; but if you can teach him to learn by creating curiosity, he will continue the learning process as long as he lives. – Clay P. Bedford

In the elementary years, two-thirds of a child's waking time is spent outside of school; but learning does not strictly happen in the classroom. Once perceived as adult domains—places where we don't make noise or touch anything—today's museums, libraries and galleries understand the importance of bringing informal learning opportunities for children, a major visitor group, into their operations. Children learn best from adult-guided, hands-

on, participatory activities that spark their natural curiosity. When an experience goes along with a lesson, children simply learn better. Cultural experiences increase students' tolerance, empathy and critical thinking skills, helping them make connections between the activity or object and their own lives. Institutions are increasingly taking this into account when designing their exhibits, programs and interpretation. Museums are vitally important places for developing minds.

What The Exploration Place Museum + Science Centre in Prince George has discovered is that taking hands-on, experiential learning a step further not only supplements the traditional school curriculum in a meaningful way, but also offers a great number of benefits to the institution itself. That "step further" is unique in the Canadian science centre and museum field. Offering daily, year-round licensed childcare programs at our site makes The Exploration Place distinctive not only in the community, but also in the province and nation.

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Beginnings

CEO, Tracy Calogheros, came to the museum in 1994 as the marketing and graphics coordinator. She also had a young son—part of the impetus behind putting a childcare program into motion. There was a substantial need in Prince George for accessible quality childcare, and this need has only increased in the province of BC. With a lack of childcare spaces, fees being cost-prohibitive for many families, and compensation for qualified early childhood educators and other childcare staff being so low as to make drawing needed candidates into the profession difficult, childcare has become a significant political issue. The provincial government is taking measures to remedy this, but accessible childcare remains an important issue that will take multiple years to address and improve.

Calogheros was aware of potential challenges in implementing her idea, but the benefits were clear. Then executive director, George Phillips, came on board and in 2000, renovations and expansion of the existing museum building allowed the space needed to implement it. By September 2001, the Fort George Explorers After-School program completed the licencing process and opened to the community.

The program's start was slow, with only eight children enrolled and no shuttle service. Slowly, word travelled around the community that the local museum was providing a quality after-school program. In 2006-2007, The Exploration Place received 42



documented requests for after-school care with 76% of parents stating that shuttle service was critical. Three 15-passenger vans were purchased between 2002 and 2007, allowing 39 children out of an eventual 45 licensed spaces to be transported from their schools to The Exploration Place daily. Enrolment climbed accordingly.

In 2007, tenants on the second floor of the museum building relocated, and the now-vacant office space provided the perfect opportunity to expand within the original footprint. Renovations were done with the goal of creating a dedicated space. The Early Explorers Preschool program was launched in September 2007, offering four streams of preschool, Monday to Friday, for 80 children during the school year. The same year, Fort George Explorers won a Canadian Association of Science Centres Award for Best Onsite Program.

Integrated Learning programs spend time in our in-house and travelling exhibits, which become always-changing interactive lessons

*Photo credit:
Kimberly Carlton*

Some preschoolers discover what it might have been like to be a snack for a Tyrannosaurus Rex!

*Photo credit:
Catherine Lehocki*



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A Symbiotic Relationship

Licensed programs mean a child can be within our physical building for hundreds of hours a year, often for multiple years. A child enrolled in preschool will benefit from an average of 437.5 hours of engagement annually, and for an older child in the after-school program, that jumps to an astounding 746 hours per year. Altogether, we have a cumulative 35,000 hours to help shape the young minds of our preschoolers, and 41,075 hours to engage our school-aged children. This is a huge opportunity to not only educate kids, but to connect with them as trusted and stable figures in their

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lives, providing them with unique opportunities and experiences in a fun, non-intimidating environment that fosters social, physical, emotional, and intellectual development.

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Retaining quality staff can be a struggle for non-profit organizations and childcare programming has been an extremely effective staff retention tool. Preschool, after-school and camps are provided for all children of full-time employees as a taxable benefit, saving them thousands of dollars per year. Consequently, qualified and capable staff with families stay longer, enjoying a healthy work-life balance. The children of staff grow up in the museum world, and many have gone on to work or volunteer with us.

Generating revenue is by necessity a prime focus of museums and other cultural institutions. The Exploration Place must generate \$2,537.31 per day over and above government grants just to keep the doors open. In 2018, over \$86,000 in profit came from preschool, after-school, and camp programs, even after expenditures such as supplies and staff wages.



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Challenges

As a relatively large institution in the North, The Exploration Place has the benefit of adequate space to accommodate these programs (though there never does seem to be enough space, no matter a museum's size!) Running programs on this scale could be a challenge for a smaller institution, but programs can be sized to match the resources at hand. After becoming licenced, there is also a substantial amount of capital funding available from the provincial government to assist with the expenses of starting a program, and the creation of new spaces is currently a priority.

To be eligible for government funding, it is necessary to become licenced through the region's health authority. There are many regulations to be adhered to in order to become and remain licenced, such as indoor and outdoor space requirements,

health and supervision policies, staff training requirements, and other factors. Licencing officers are assigned to each facility to ensure programs are running adequately and perform yearly inspections. Although becoming licenced can be an intensive process, it ensures safety, quality, and continuous improvement. Being licenced allows facilities to apply for funding, such as Child Care Operating Funding from the provincial government, which accounts for over \$10,000 worth of revenue for our facility each year. As of September 2018, the government has introduced an Early Childhood Educator Wage Enhancement, adding \$1.00 per hour to the wages of qualified staff. Parents of children in licenced programs are also eligible to receive government subsidies, making programs more affordable.

The Early Explorers hatched a mantis egg case in the classroom, and loved seeing the dozens of tiny mantids

Photo credit: Catherine Lehocki

Integrated Learning— Beyond “Childcare”

After two decades, childcare programs were separated from the Community Engagement department, becoming their own distinct entity in 2018. The renaming of the department to Integrated Learning more accurately reflects what we have always done and lends a legitimacy to our programs as more than “daycare”, (or, a term much maligned in the field, “glorified babysitting”). With a focused goal of not only supervising, but actively educating children, we are working towards incorporating all the knowledge and resources at our disposal into the experiential education we offer.



These resources include our galleries, exhibits, and collections, as well as our diverse and educated staff. Children get the benefit of behind-the-scenes tours, guest speakers, and activities presented by staff members from all departments—from Curatorial, to Facilities, to Community Engagement. This “cross-pollination” of disciplines and expertise leads to a well-rounded curriculum that keeps kids interested, engaged, and learning without even realizing it.

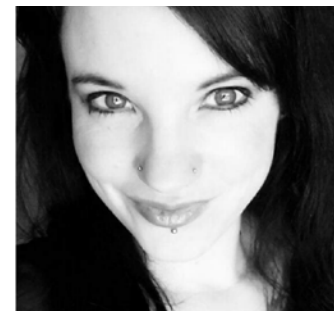
The Exploration Place’s mission statement is “Past Present + Future: Making History Together.” Integrated Learning is the “Future” part of the mission, as we give children in our programs the opportunity to participate in everything we do. And these kids have done it all—tried out power tools in our workshop, examined and touched real fossils and historical artifacts, held Madagascar hissing cockroaches, made their own snacks from scratch, and received top-notch education from not only their teachers and instructors, but people from all different backgrounds that are also familiar and trusted adults in their lives. This stand-out interactive structure has made us strongly sought-after in the community and resulted in our programs being fully subscribed during the 2018-2019 school year.

STEAM learning, lessons in heritage and current events, Indigenous education, and social-emotional literacy concepts are the foundation of Integrated



Learning, where we aim to help create the next generation of critical thinkers. We believe that the best way to learn is by doing, and fully subscribe to the adage, “Hands On, Minds On”. Our goal is to recognize and nourish the individual strengths and learning styles of each child, and we do so by ensuring that our curriculum is integrative, participatory, learner-centered, and most of all, fun! With a full team of dedicated museum professionals, we collaborate to offer an exceptional and unique experience for children, helping them emerge with the foundation of the skills and knowledge necessary to excel in our ever-changing world. The benefits are vast and far-reaching, and this model can offer practical solutions for museums facing the task of finding innovative ways to generate revenue, retain qualified staff, encourage engagement from the community, and introduce the younger generation to the important work of museums.

Assistant Curator Chad Hellenius shows off some artifacts from the museum collection to the Early Explorers Preschool
Photo credit: Robyn Reimer



ROBYN REIMER

Robyn Reimer is the Manager – Integrated Learning at The Exploration Place in Prince George. From an English and Human Resources background, Robyn entered the museum world in 2013 as a childcare worker, and has since gone on to manage and supervise The Exploration Place’s Integrated Learning children’s programs. Dedicated to educating and caring for children, Robyn likes to say she has 125 kids at any given time, as well as three of her own.