

*The Field Museum's
new exhibit has
plenty of kid appeal*

BY BETHEL SWIFT

PHOTOS BY FRANK PINC

Young explorers' dreams might just come true at The Field Museum's new Crown Family PlayLab.

Almost everything in the PlayLab is related to regular exhibits in the museum, making this 7,500-square-foot educational play place especially relevant for kids 2-6 (with activities adaptable up to age 10).

"This is meant to be the gateway to the rest of the museum for families with young children," says Beth Crownover, public programs

and operations director at the museum.

"We asked ourselves: What do we have to offer and how can we make it accessible?"

Crownover says. "Scientific behavior comes naturally for children. Kids

IF YOU GO

Beginning Sept. 14, the Crown Family PlayLab will be open 9 a.m.-4 p.m. daily. Admission is free with general admission to the museum.

have no fear; they just jump right in and start playing."

The staff at the Field Museum put their heads and their hearts into this project. From the durable yet soft-edged climbing log made of a foam and flexible urethane mixture, to the dinosaur egg puppet with a pop-out baby dinosaur, it is obvious this place was intended for children to be safe and have fun while learning.

Wondering what to expect from the new PlayLab? Chicago Parent got a sneak peek before the floors were finished in order to give you an insider's look:

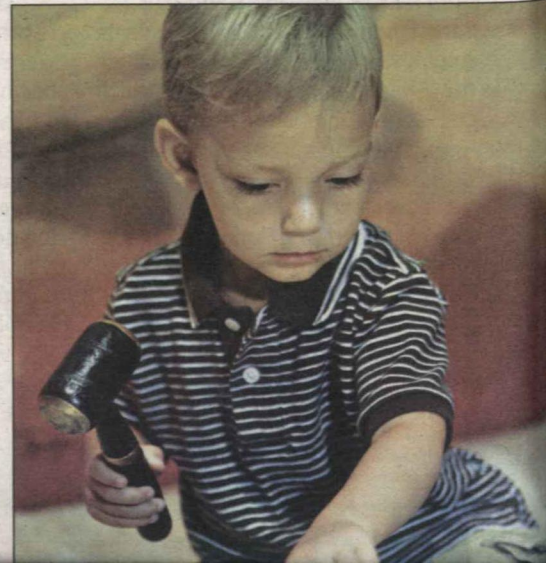
Entrance and washrooms

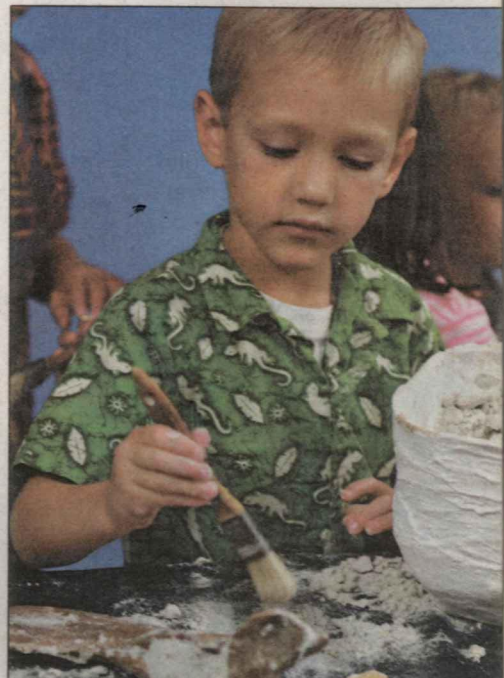
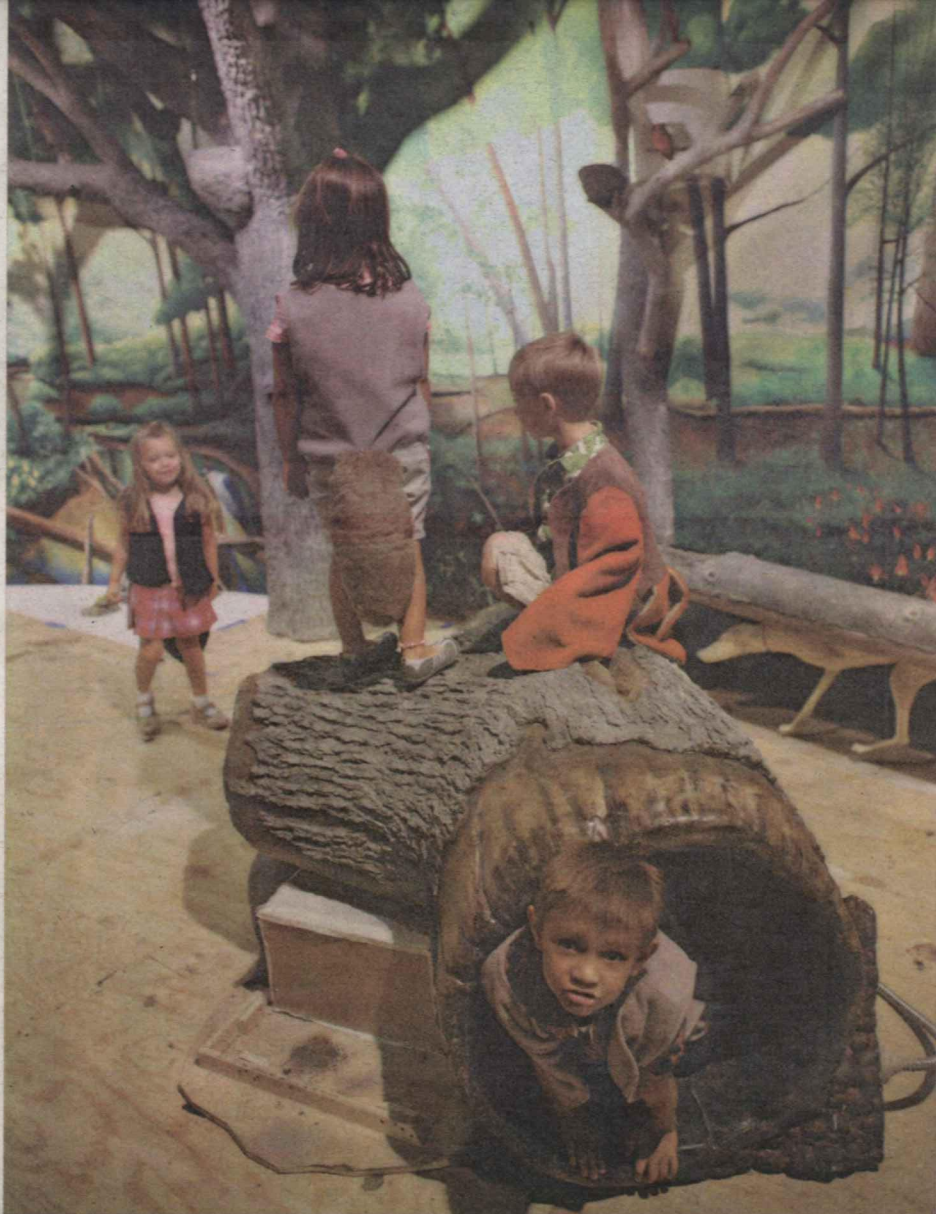
The east entrance is the closest to the PlayLab. Once there, you can park your stroller and herd your little ones inside. Conveniently located near the entrance are parent-friendly bathroom facilities equipped with changing table, water fountain and tot-size toilets and sinks.

Bethel Swift is an intern at Chicago Parent.



Playing to learn





Illinois Woodland

A hand-painted forest provides the backdrop for this interactive exhibit. Kids can climb up and through a log, dress up in a costume of their favorite wood-dwelling animal and put on a play. "This is the feeling of stepping into one of those dioramas," Crownover says. "There's a lot of seek-and-find that's interactive with the mural." The lighting dims for a nighttime feel and brightens for "daytime." Kids can also light up animal mounts and hear the animals' sounds by pushing special buttons.

The pueblo

From woods to a sun-baked pueblo, a second mural helps supply the climate change for this 13th-century farm. Harvest and store corn, "cook" it and grate it with *mano* and *metate*, then use sand-filled fabric rolls to make coil pots. "Everybody needs to eat," says Cheryl Bardoe, senior project manager for the PlayLab. "So kids can relate to that, but at the same time

they are learning about different environments and different cultures."

This area features two hands-on dollhouse displays of a modern-day Saharan Tuareg tent and an 1800s North American Pawnee earth lodge. The fully functional models are complete with people, livestock and furniture.

Scientists' Lab

Play with real artifacts, including Plexiglas-encased specimens for younger kids to sort. Or examine small objects under a Lazy Susan type of magnification station that projects images onto a large video screen. "Peek-a-boo drawers" tilt out to reveal fun surprises like Chinese slippers or a Navajo rattle. Young scientists can sit at four lab tables and examine tools from diverse cultures, pressed plant life and animal skulls.

Dinosaur Field Station

Dig for bones (including a cast of one from Sue), examine, measure and identify them and even use them to

build a dinosaur. Play in a dinosaur's nest or create a "dinoscene," an ecosystem like the one in the museum's Evolving Planet exhibit.

Book Nook

This quiet, cozy area is stocked with kids' books on anthropology, history, botany, zoology and geology. While relaxing for kids and their caregivers, Crownover says the book section also promotes the museum's objective to increase even the youngest child's knowledge of scientific vocabulary, questions and curiosities. "It is part of our initiative on scientific literacy," Crownover says. "Our goal here at the museum is to make this the cornerstone of science education for children in the Chicagoland area."

Rhythm Section

In this room, listen to soundtracks of respected artists playing three distinct traditional instruments: the Taiko from Japan, the Sabar from Senegal

and the Cajon from Cuba. Play eight different instruments (including the three heard on the recordings) to create your own music.

Art Studio

Displays of fish, leaves, even a replica Stingray, decorate the walls of the art area. Counter space and cabinets accommodate a variety of nature projects led by docents and facilitators. Activities change with the seasons, and may include crafting a clay pot, making a journal of nature rubbings or decorating a pair of binoculars to use for observation of creatures in their own neighborhood. Kids can complete a project to take with them or receive a take-home sheet to do at home.

Baby areas

Three "padded infant zones" let caretakers keep an eye on the scientific exploits of their older kids while simultaneously caring for their youngest children as they crawl around. **NP**

Making every kid count

Annual report shows economic stress affecting Illinois families

BY BETHEL SWIFT

Parents in the U.S. are losing economic ground and their kids are suffering for it, according to the 2007 Kids Count Data Book compiled by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Of the 10 indicators of child well-being, six showed improvement (two only slightly) since 2000 and four slipped. "Nationally, no area was neutral," says Laura Beavers, research associate with the foundation.

Illinois ranked 26th among the states, a fall from 24th last year. Its gains and losses generally followed national trends.

Julia Parente, director of communications with Voices for Illinois Children, attributes this state's drop to such issues as the increasing number of low-birth weight babies and fragile family situations: the number of families living in poverty and young teens becoming parents.

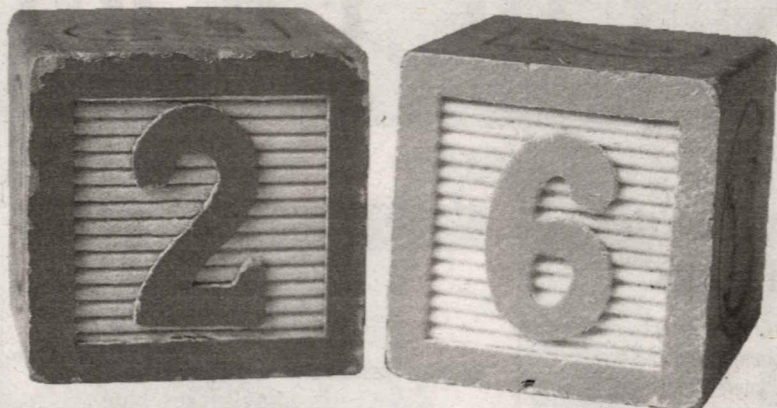
Sixteen percent of Illinois children are living in poverty, with 8 percent living in extreme poverty and 36 percent living in low-income families, according to the report.

"Child poverty is a very troubling indicator," Parente says. "It shows that there are many, many families in our state who are struggling to make ends meet."

Illinois politicians and residents need to ask if there is more that can be done to strengthen these fragile families, she says. "It's about reaching out to your neighbors and helping out in your community," Parente says. "We need to improve conditions for all children."

Several of the well-being indicators broke down along racial/ethnic lines—

better on average for Asians and Caucasians and worse on nearly all indicators for African American and Native American families. Among Latinos surveyed, results were mixed—better for birth and death rates, but worse on education and economic security.



Low-weight births continue to rise in every state, with the national rate in 2004 the highest since 1969. For African-American babies, the rate was about twice as high as any other racial or ethnic group surveyed. In African American and Native American communities, one out of every two children lives in a family where no parent has full-time, year-round employment.

Family factor

In addition to the Data Book, the foundation tackles foster care, challenging state and national governments to ensure that any child who comes through the child welfare system either reconnects with their birth family or a relative, or if that is impossible, finds an adoptive or legal guardian family relationship.

While the public recognizes that safety is the primary focus of child welfare systems, they need to realize that being safe is not enough, says Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Parente suggests individuals volunteer with the Don't Write Me Off/Foster Kids Are Our Kids initiative to mentor, tutor or just build a permanent relationship with a foster child. In 2004, 1,020 children aged out of the Illinois child welfare system without a permanent family solution. At the national level, 22,718 were emancipated to "independent living" without a family connection.

"We need to understand the critical importance of family membership, of lasting family connections for all children, including those in foster care and regardless of their age," Nelson says.

Nelson notes it is also critically important to keep siblings together and that this should be expected of every child welfare system in the U.S. "It's not always easy," he says. ☐

What the 10 key indicators say about Illinois over time

- 14th Child death rate: Better
- 16th Percent of teens who are high school dropouts: Better
- 19th Percent of teens not attending school or work: Better
- 20th Percent of children living in families where no parent has full-time, year-round employment: Worse
- 20th Teen death rate: Better
- 21st Percent of children in single-parent families: Better
- 22nd Percent of children living in poverty: Worse
- 28th Teen birth rate: Better
- 31st Infant mortality rate: Better
- 34th Percent of low-birth weight babies: Worse

Bethel Swift is an intern at Chicago Parent.