



**GET MESSY,
MAKE NOISE,
ENJOY, CREATE**

THE CHILDREN'S DISCOVERY CENTRE COMES TO TORONTO

By Dorothea Helms



Play with your food at Eat Street!

Seeing the wide-eyed wonder of visitors to the Children's Discovery Centre makes the work of the past 18 months all worthwhile to Jeanhy Shim, CEO and founder of Toronto's only "museum" for children ages six and under. The sounds of laughter and chatter — and even occasional concentration-filled silence — are contagious, as kids immerse themselves in 10 different Discovery Zones spread throughout the temporary 20,000 square foot space. Around every corner, there is a new experience involving "tools" for imaginative play that invite audiences to get messy, make noise, enjoy and create.

Careful attention to meeting the needs of families with young children is evident upon first entry, with a reception area that offers ample room for stroller parking and a place to hang coats. A first stop might be *Imagination Station*, set on the moon and illuminated by the glow of the earth and the whirling solar system. In this space, there's wild and wonderful building going on using the distinctive and lightweight big blue blocks by Imagination Playground. This area also has easy-to-hold magnetized Felto tiles that are simple to combine into imaginative shapes and sizes, especially when done with a partner, be it an adult or another visiting child.

Nearby, children are busy exploring the *Mini City* by Skygrid Construction. Here, tricycles, pull wagons and pedestrians share kid-sized streets complete with traffic lights, cross walks and speed-limit signs. *Mini City* has a large mural of Toronto's familiar skyline and a gravel pit filled with toy building machines. It's an innovative re-creation of the urban experience. Leaving the hustle and bustle of the city behind, visitors may find themselves in the *Campground*, where they can climb into a 10-person tent, a canoe that sits in the "river," or cross over a bridge or stepping stones to examine forest insects and creatures with a magnifying glass. A large wall mural and recorded nature sounds transport you to the very heart of a Canadian forest.

The aptly named *Art Hive* buzzes with creativity as children paint and draw on large easels, and a Plexiglas painting and squeegee wall are transformed into kaleidoscopes of colour. Here, children learn to share and collaborate on art projects. *Art Hive* also includes a specialized area for infants and toddlers.

For many children, no play date is complete without dress-up and movement. Your pint-size actors, directors and screen writers should love the *Make Believe* zone, where it's all up to them to use the props provided or make their own sets to help tell the story they create. A staff facilitator is there to offer assistance when needed, and there's a stage for live performances, as well as a puppet theatre. It's really fun to watch kids in the dance studio, where mats, mirrors and a ballet barre are all they seem to need to get their groove on.

Clangs, bangs, jangles and toots draw budding musicians into the *Boom Room*, where there's a wall of household and found objects for music-making, plus a wide variety of instruments from around the world. According to Shim, the sounds in the *Boom Room* are rich with important learning lessons as kids express their emotions, learn about cause and effect, and just plain have fun. The noise doesn't faze future veterinarians and animal lovers who practice their skills at making stuffed furry friends well again in the *Pet Vet* zone, presented by The Aaron Family, and situated next door. This kid-size replica of a veterinary office has instruments, bandages and an examination table. Tucked behind this section is the *Quiet Area* available for nursing moms and kids who need to take a break, designed to be especially comforting for children with autism.

Getting children off to a healthy start is top of mind in *Eat Street*, where kids are encouraged to play with their food! They can fill baskets with items in the miniature grocery store, "pay" for them at the cashier and take them to the mini kitchen and pretend they are preparing a meal. Foodie games and learning about eating the rainbow are part of this colourful space. For adults, there's a fully functioning demonstration kitchen where nutritionists offer helpful tips about making healthy food choices. The adjoining Sago Mini Pet Café, sponsored by Sago Sago Toys Inc., is an area where visitors can take a break and enjoy a picnic with items brought from home.

Maya's Storyland is a cozy space with ceiling-hung hammock chairs and reading forts where children discover letters, words and stories with their parents and caregivers. This area has fewer distractions and takes the excitement level down a notch,

especially helpful just before getting ready for a snack or preparing to depart. In the *First Discoveries* zone, the Centre's tiniest visitors enjoy freedom of movement in a welcoming, safe, tactile environment where babies can crawl and roll around. Everything in the Centre, including the sparkling clean washrooms with change tables, shelves and hooks for diaper bags and handbags, has been thoughtfully provided for convenience and practicality.

After spending a few hours in this remarkable space, you may wonder why it's taken so long to bring a venue like this to our city. Shim is a Toronto real estate analyst and strategist who first became aware of a children's facility of this kind 11 years ago when she visited the Bay Area Discovery Museum in Sausalito, California, with her nieces. Raising a child in the city, she has experienced a shortage of age-appropriate venues for parents of children under six in the downtown area.

Using Stats Canada information and conducting her own research into Toronto's urban demographics, Shim projects an increase in the number of young people who will be starting families in the next five to 10 years joining those already raising their children in the city. She believes the time is right to act on her desire to create a children's museum in her hometown. With an advisory team of well-respected early childhood development professionals and curators, Shim has pulled together an incredible place specifically designed for play-based learning, a philosophy she strongly promotes. These advisors and her founding partners have been extremely generous to the project. In fact, the current building that houses the temporary pilot project in the Garrison Point neighbourhood was donated by DiamondCorp and Build Toronto.

Don't be fooled by the name: the Children's Discovery Centre has also been designed to help enrich adults' lives. The centre brings together stay-at-home parents, moms on maternity leave, grandparents, nannies, school group supervisors, daycare workers and tourists. Strategic partners will present free programming, services, performances and activities. Examples include mom & baby yoga, mini-ballet classes, clay classes, science, puppet plays, drumming, reptile visits, lunchtime Mozart concerts and more.

Centre staff are all qualified early childhood educators and can explain which developmental stages the activity zones focus on. They are also documenting what is happening in order to evaluate the design, which includes children interacting with these surroundings in surprising ways. The compiled data will be used to inform and guide the team in fine-tuning a permanent Children's Discovery Centre for children up to the age of 12, which Shim hopes to announce this fall. She will share the results of her research with City of Toronto planners and private developers/builders to help them in creating communities where residents of all ages, including the very youngest, can thrive.



Mini City: an innovative re-creation of the urban experience.



Campground transports you to the very heart of a Canadian forest.



The sky is the limit with Imagination Station!



Jeanhy Shim, CEO and founder of Toronto's only "museum" for children.

The Children's Discovery Centre is open daily from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. until September 30, 2015. Infants under the age of one are admitted free, while Individual passes for children and adults cost \$13 each plus applicable taxes.

For more information, visit www.childrensdiscoverycentre.com