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The Rooftop Ramble at the Madison Children's Museum features live animals, a greenhouse and other engaging activities for kids year-round.

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The Possibleopolis exhibit at the Madison Children's Museum offers an interactive environment celebrating creativity and invention.

Plenty of *play*

Wisconsin offers adventure, play and learning at its many children's museums

By Lesa Knollenberg

You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation. -PLATO

Plato's quote, screened on the wall of Madison Children's Museum, proves to be quite true.

Wisconsin is host to some of the country's best children's museums, where children tend to absorb rather than just learn. A day spent in one of Wisconsin's great hands-on educational centers is a day full of discoveries.

Madison Children's Museum

Taking children to Madison Children's Museum isn't so much an activity as an adventure. Walking into the atrium, adults are drawn to stop and take it all in, while kids are propelled to explore. "Look at this!" and "Check this out!" echo through the airy atrium. The smell of pizza entices from the on-site café, a locally based concept that is catching on in other museums across the country. Madison's chic Roman Candle Sparkler serves Roman Candle Pizza, Chocolate Shoppe Ice Cream and nutritious snacks.

The Madison Children's Museum is layered with activities for children of all ages, from infants to age 12. The drop-in Art Studio and Rooftop Ramble are favorites for all. With a stunning view of downtown Madison, the Rooftop is a playground in the sky and open year-round. Explorers experience nature and its treasures: a pond, waterfall, gardens and paths. Animal lovers will be thrilled to see the chickens and homing pigeons outside. Inside the clubhouse, they'll find chicks, frogs, turtles, a snake, and binoculars and microscopes to learn even more.

For the younger set, the Wilderrest is designed for sensory appeal with all-natural materials. Youngsters enjoy dramatic play in the Music Hut, Heart Hut and the popular Farmers' Market Cart and planting area. The Bone Bridge and Tree House are an immediate draw, where climbing through a series of wooden structures puts children high above the tallest adult.



Young children will enjoy the whimsical Happy Baby Garden exhibit at The Building for Kids in Appleton.

One of Madison Children's Museum's most popular exhibits is the Gerbil "Wheel," a human-sized version of a gerbil wheel. It's also a hit with adults during the museum's quarterly Adult Swim events, where an adults-only crowd can explore for an evening. Possibilities

are an interactive area where older explorers enjoy the Wayback Machine (an interactive electronic playground), the Hodgepodge Mahal (a two-story climber made of reclaimed materials) or the Punch Buggy (a must-see). The Brand Log Cabin, an authentic historical structure, gives

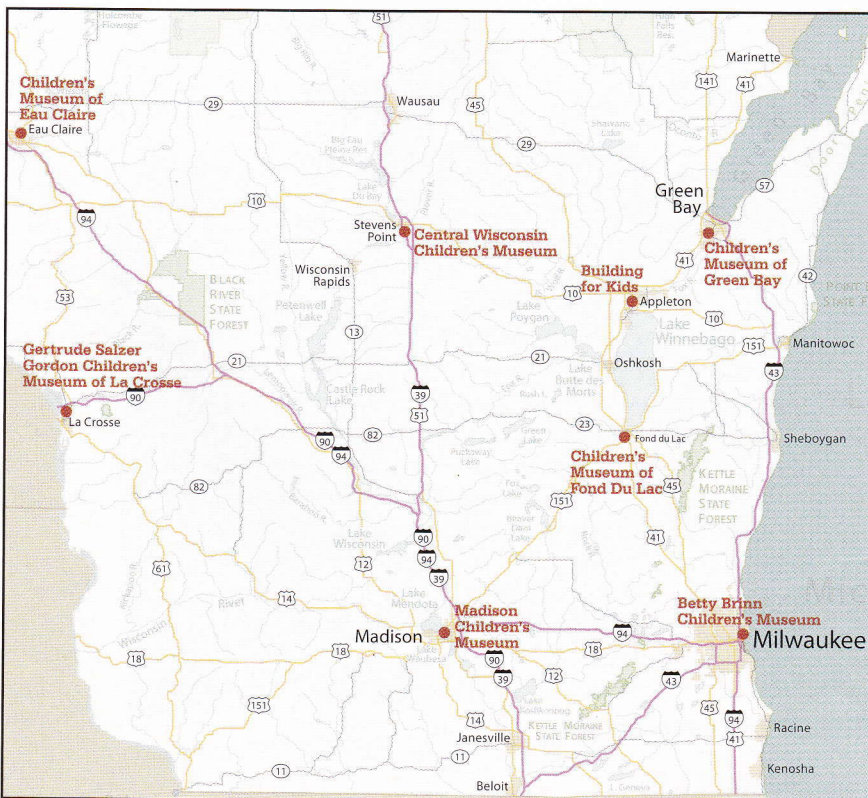
pioneer wannabes a chance to do chores and activities they might have done in the 1830s. madisonchildrensmuseum.org

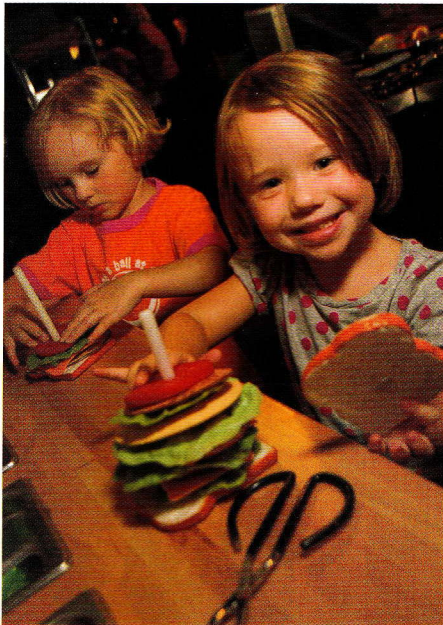
The Building for Kids, Appleton

Step inside the Building for Kids in Appleton, and you've entered a new world. A three-story tree house rises from the building's entrance, with five individual forts and varying degrees of climbing difficulty. Designed by kids for kids, the museum is geared to children 10 and under, and the energy created in the lively environment exemplifies the museum's mission: "Build children's imagination, creativity and confidence."

Imagination soars when kids step inside the Gulfstream Jet. A full-sized airplane — complete with cockpit and control tower — allows the curious to imagine being a pilot or control engineer. If fighting fires is more like their thing, children can sit in the driver's seat of Station 99 Fire Truck and learn about fire safety at the same time. In the Doll Hospital, they don doctor scrubs and care for dolls with life-like characteristics.

Make-believe continues at the Kids Town Diner, where kids create and serve meals to pretend diners. The Kwik Trip convenience store is a replica of the adult





LEFT: Kids explore the variety of activities at Betty Brinn. **RIGHT:** Rotating tires and auto maintenance are just some of the activities children will enjoy at the Super Service Center in the Home Town exhibit at the Betty Brinn.

version, where scanners beep, purchases are made, and cars are washed. The nearby town exhibit features a hospital, grocery store and pet shop, giving children the experience of a realistic work setting. Learning is fun in the DaVinci Studio, an extensive art and science center where kids can participate in (sometimes messy) hands-on science and arts-related activities (aprons provided). The Move-It exhibit features levers, tubes and baskets that allow kids to learn basic engineering concepts.

The Building for Kids also hosts The Amazing Heart, an exhibit for children to climb up and slide down the ventricles and arteries of a 10-foot human heart. Traveling exhibits keep the museum bustling during busy summer months. buildingforkids.org

Betty Brinn Children's Museum

Betty Brinn, a Milwaukee businesswoman who spent the majority of her childhood in foster homes and orphanages, dedicated her adult life to helping women and children in the Milwaukee area improve their lives.

Betty Brinn Children's Museum is a fitting tribute to Brinn's spirit as the museum is teeming with possibilities. The It's Artastic exhibit lets children experience being the conductor for a performance of the Milwaukee Youth Symphony Orchestra. Kids generate their own musical sounds using a climbing structure (with a talking drum, walk-on keyboard, giant chimes and a 10-foot percussion cascade). They can engineer

music and produce it in a recording studio. If dance is their passion, they'll learn a dance choreographed by the Milwaukee Ballet or put on a puppet show with moving curtains and backgrounds. Parents are encouraged to watch, with theater-style seating for the finished product.

One of Betty Brinn Children's Museum's biggest draws is Home Town. This child-sized town gives kids the chance to try out the world of adults. Aspiring adults can use an ATM, be an anchor or producer for a news studio, run a grocery store, work in a post office or on a construction site or a shipping dock. Phone lines connect between the buildings, and curiosity and cooperation are the currency.

Combining activity and learning, a giant interactive board game called It's Your Move helps children learn more about a healthy lifestyle. They'll learn about activity versus rest, safety and personal care; they also learn about nutrition by learning the difference between "whoa" and "go" foods. It's learning and fun at its finest. Similarly, two companion exhibits, Raceways and On A Roll, combine the love of curiosity with the thrill of physics.

Betty Brinn Children's Museum is geared for children up to age 10, and younger children will be thrilled with the exhibit called Let's Play Railway, a large-scale replica of the famous BRIO train. The engine, cattle wagon and caboose are just like the miniature versions kids have grown to love. Young ones also love Betty's Busy Backyard. Toddlers use the waterfall, leaves, tree stump drums, sandbox and vegetable garden to stimulate math, language, motor and cooperative learning skills. bbcmkids.org

A trip to any of Wisconsin's innovative children's museums inspires curiosity. Museums spark children's creativity and inspire them to be imaginative at home. After a day of discovery, perhaps that's the best souvenir of all. ew

OTHER WISCONSIN CHILDREN'S MUSEUMS:

CENTRAL WISCONSIN CHILDREN'S MUSEUM, STEVENS POINT
cwchildrensmuseum.org

CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF EAU CLAIRE
cmec.cc

CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF FOND DU LAC
childrensmuseumfdl.org

GERTRUDE SALZER GORDON CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF LA CROSSE
funmuseum.org

THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM OF GREEN BAY (OPENING MARCH 2012)
gbchildrensmuseum.org



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