



Curious Kids' Museum and Curious Kids' Discovery Zone

Expands Hands-On Learning for Kids

WRITER | JULIE FORD
PHOTOS | CURIOUS KIDS' MUSEUM

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Children love exploring museums and the more active they are, the more fun they have. Along the southern shores of Lake Michigan in a popular family vacation destination, two children's museums provide learning opportunities that encourage critical thinking, creativity and curiosity with extraordinary multisensory, hands-on exhibits.

The Curious Kids' Museum and Curious Kids' Discovery Zone in St. Joseph near Silver Beach has served more than 2,000,000 visitors since opening in 1989. Known as the Museum on the Bluff, the Curious Kids' Museum offers two floors of hands-on exhibits and activities for children ages 12 months to 10 years that focus on science and technology, history, culture and human perception.

"Our purpose is hands-on play and that's how children learn — through play," Lori Marciniak, executive director of Curious Kids' Museum and Curious Kids' Discovery Zone, says. "With early childhood education and hands-on museums,

children experience sounds, colors, smells and other people, and things they can manipulate with their hands."

Kids can pick apples in the apple orchard and work at the farm stand. They can role play as a veterinarian, read real X-rays and blend science with fun. Budding paleontologists can assemble a triceratops and enjoy a volcano slide. There's a lot to experience and that's just the first floor. The second floor is filled with transportation-related activities and a full-scale lighted peg board.

"I was either in first or second grade when I went with my school," Shaye Hicks from Decatur says. "One of my core memories was an apple-picking wall with pretend apples and a basket you would fill up. There was also a volcano slide, a space area and I remember having a blast."

Within walking distance, the Discovery Zone features the engaging exhibit, "Secret Ingredients: The Inner Workings and Hidden Histories of Your

Kitchen," sponsored by Whirlpool in the Gast Traveling Exhibit Gallery. The exhibit includes:

- A gigantic KitchenAid Stand Mixer
- A dishwasher and washing machine kids can power with their feet
- A giant-sized classic clothes wringer for a full-body wringing experience
- Play kitchens from 1910, 1959 and 1989, where kids can compare the similarities and differences in one of the most important rooms in the home
- A space for designing and redesigning a kitchen
- Electric, gas and water meters for kids to figure out which appliances run the most efficiently in the home
- An area for creating your own household invention

The Curious Kids' Discovery Zone, which opened in 2010, also has a two-story Lighthouse Kids' Climbing Tower where kids can pretend to be a lighthouse keeper. The Lake Michigan Water Table Exhibit has 10 different hands-on activities for kids to sail a handmade boat through currents, experience stormy seas and learn about dams and locks.

"Both museums are very family friendly locations and they're a place where you can take your kids to learn things without even knowing they're learning because they are having so much fun," Beth Ferry from Eau Claire says. "The Discovery Zone is in the same place as the old fashioned carousel, and both have a lot of hands-on activities."

In 2025, a third building was purchased at 601 Main Street, and all new exhibits will be ready when the doors open in 2027. The new exhibits are currently in the works and will include STEM-based activities:

- **The Big Dig** – problem-solving, large motor play and puzzles will be part of a paleontology exhibit
- **The Test Lab** – motion, speed, gravity, air and other forces will be part of a collection of activities
- **The Spotlight Theater** – costumes, props, face-painting will encourage imaginative play and emphasize early literacy practices
- **A New and Improved Farmers Market** – the current agricultural exhibit has been such a hit, the exhibit will include new agriculture-themed features

When the new museum location opens, the much larger facility will house familiar and new exhibits, the Curious Kids' Discovery Zone will remain, and the Curious Kids' Museum — the Museum on the Bluff — will become a venue for children's parties, camps and gatherings.

"The Discovery Zone is smaller than the current Curious Kids' Museum and one half of it is a traveling exhibit — a nice perk for members because they change up," Marciniak says. "Currently, I have three museums looking at the 'Secret Ingredients' exhibit. It's meant to travel. Whirlpool wanted to help us with operating costs and sustainability long-term."

There's still time to see the Whirlpool-sponsored kitchen exhibit. While the "Building Curiosity-Play a Part, Fund the Fun!" capital campaign is in full swing, the "Secret Ingredients" exhibit will not be rented to another museum.

"We fill important needs in the community such as early childhood education and family time," Marciniak says. "We get a lot of comments like, 'We're so busy, but when we come to the museum, we just slow down.'"

Marciniak says kids get very focused on electronics, while museums are communal. Curious Kids' Museum and the Curious Kids' Discovery Zone offer hands-on cooperative play. Children play with others as leaders, followers and take turns, plus use fine motor and gross motor skills — all those opportunities are in the museum for them to learn and grow.

"We do that better than anybody." □

[Curious Kids' Museum](#)
415 Lake Boulevard, St. Joseph, MI 49085
269-983-2543

[Curious Kids' Discovery Zone](#)
333 Broad St., St. Joseph, MI 49085
269-982-8500

CuriousKidsMuseum.org

