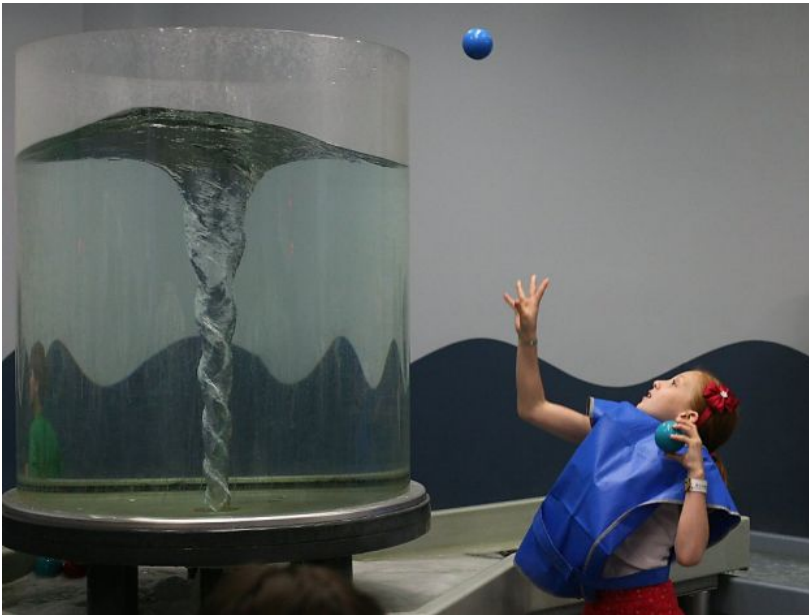


Museum sets aside time for autistic kids

Jill Tucker

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<http://www.sfgate.com/education/article/Museum-sets-aside-time-for-autistic-kids-4461801.php#photo-4523908>



Katie Heathcote, 8, throws a ball into a whirlpool at the Children's Discovery Museum in San Jose, Calif. on Saturday, April 20 2013. The Children's Discovery Museum opens its doors to children with autism for a one-night special. Photo: James Tensuan, The Chronicle

On a typical day, the Children's [Discovery Museum of San Jose](#) would be parent [Shannon Rosa](#)'s worst nightmare.

She and her son Leo, 12, would draw angry stares as the large boy whooped and galloped sideways, narrowly avoiding small children and never saying sorry or hello or "Can I play with you?"

Other parents probably would complain.

But on a recent night, no one at the museum glared at Leo or his mom or even noticed his unusual behavior.

That's because all the other parents there had a child with autism, too.

The museum is among a handful of similar children's centers across the country that offer special access to children with the disorder, providing services and accommodations to make it easier for them to visit.

"Normally people would freak out," Rosa said. "The hardest thing is the expectations of other people. Autistic behavior makes them very uncomfortable."

An estimated 1 out of every 50 children in the United States was diagnosed with autism in 2012, almost double what it was in 2008 - an increase attributed largely to changes in diagnostic practices rather than prevalence.

In recent years, the growing number of children identified as autistic has increased efforts - in schools and other child-centered environments - to understand the disorder and provide support to families struggling with it.

"The Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose is among the leaders in providing this kind of programming," said [Diane Kopasz](#), spokeswoman for the national [Association of Children's Museums](#). "It's definitely a recent trend."

Free to play

For nearly three hours on a recent night, Leo and other Bay Area autistic children played with their siblings and parents, getting wet, climbing in the fire truck and exploring with creations that spin, bounce, wobble and light up.

It was the fourth such event in the last year or so.

In the water area, one boy played in the section usually reserved for those 4 and under. He was a bit older than that and was flapping his arms wildly, sending water flying, but no one told him to stop.

On these special evenings, the rules are relaxed and the staff is trained to work with the children, said [Marilee Jennings](#), the museum's executive director.

"These families feel like people are judging them a lot," she added. "Nobody's judging tonight."

Making things easier

In addition to bending rules, the museum staff created an online site that offered pictures and stories about the museum and exhibits, something that can help quell the anxiety that autistic children can have over new experiences.

There was also an art room converted into a quiet room so overstimulated children could take a break.

Near the water, the staff kept dry shirts on hand for those feeling physical discomfort from getting wet.

And at the exit, there was a gift, a light-up ball to encourage a smooth departure given the difficulty some of the children have with transitions.

About 100 families had signed up for the event, paying \$20 total for their group, regardless of the number, a discount from the normal \$12 per person entrance fee.

Room for Katie

Katie Heathcote, 8, came with her mom.

Looking like a princess in a white fur cape, sparkly earrings and a red headband, Katie repeatedly circled the bottom floor of the museum where other children were using the bubble maker.

She was looking for some open space.

"She doesn't do well in crowds," her mom, [Janet Heathcote](#), said.

Katie circled and then stopped at the bottom of the staircase and looked up, scanned the area and then circled again.

"I would like to get up one of these stairs without a crowd there," Katie said.

On a regular admission day, that would have been difficult if not impossible.

Katie soon spotted her chance and climbed the stairs to explore more exhibits.

Her mom smiled as she watched her youngest child, one of five siblings - three of whom have autism, Heathcote said.

Easy visits to museums or the grocery store were impossible when her oldest son, now an adult, was a child.

"I wish I had this for my 24-year-old," Heathcote said. "Back then, people at the market would be mean. I'd say, 'He's autistic.' They'd say, 'I don't care if he's autistic.' "

On Saturday evening, no one cared that Katie was autistic either, but this time it was in a good way.

"It makes me very proud of what we do," Jennings said. "This place is universally beloved by children."

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