

San Jose children's museum expands with new interactive educational area

The 4,000-square-foot space at the Children's Discovery Museum will be open to the public on June 29



Darcy and Denise Ly run towards the interactive California poppy exhibit at the new outdoor Exploration Portal debuting at the Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose, Friday, June 21, 2024, in San Jose, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)



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A correction to an earlier version of this article has been appended to the end of the article.

Both kids and adults explored a new educational play space near downtown San Jose on Friday, turning the wheel to open up a giant solar sunflower or crawling through a set of hexagonal tubes that resembled a beehive.

The area of roughly 4,000 square feet, named the Exploration Portal, is part of the Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose, tucked in an urban area next to the 87 Freeway and the Guadalupe River. The area, included in the price of admission to the museum, features eight interactive exhibits meant to focus on helping children learn about patterns, proportion, scale and symmetry by combining reflecting mathematical and scientific concepts through nature.

Marilee Jennings, executive director of Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose, said that the museum wanted the Exploration Portal to develop on concepts featured at Bill's Backyard, a half-acre outdoor area devoted to nature explanation. Seeing that visiting families had taken interest in a beehive displayed at the museum inspired an open-ended structure of stacked hexagons that kids could climb through, she said.



Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose debuted their outdoor Exploration Portal with preschoolers from Educare California at Silicon Valley taking it for a test run, Friday, June 21, 2024, in San Jose, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

Another example was the three giant Smartflowers in the area, which featured a hand crank that let people open up the petals of the flowers, exposing the inner solar panels to sunlight as a way to help kids contextualize solar power.

"It's our philosophy that kids learn best when you allow them to explore using all of their senses," Jennings said.



Preschoolers help unveil the new outdoor Exploration Portal at the Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose, Friday, June 21, 2024, in San Jose, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

Rich Turner, director of exhibits and facilities at the museum, said that the interactive exhibits are meant to teach kids how to identify patterns and sequences and grouping, which can help them learn how to perform counting and math.

"Being able to put those simple little connections together that we take for granted but little kids, they need to learn that," Turner said.

In addition to encouraging children to explore nature, the space had two other goals: turning the underutilized urban area next to Bill's Backyard into an inviting and educational environment and modeling the use of sustainable materials. Various features in the portal use natural techniques to filter pollution from rainwater, replenish groundwater and highlight drought-tolerant plants and renewable wood resources.

"(Pollution) by the overhead freeway structures and planes flying by ... needs to get filtered out of the water," Turner said. "So the more that we can put water back into the ground rather than into the storm drains, that's a win."

The plans for the Exploration Portal began in 2018, but a scheduled 2021 opening was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to opening the area, Jennings thanked the over 200 donors for contributing to the site's funding. Several local officials spoke about the museum's efforts to make an accessible, environmentally sustainable and educational place for children.

Students from Educare, a preschool in East San Jose, were invited to play at the space and even ripped off the tarp covering the gate to the Exploration Portal. The area is expected to formally open to the public on June 29. Entry to the portal is included in the price of admission to the museum: \$18 for adults and children, \$16 for seniors, and free to members and infants one year and under.



Marilee Jennings, executive director of the Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose, watches as renowned children's entertainer Raffi Cavoukian rides a snail exhibit at the new outdoor Exploration Portal, unveiled on Friday, June 21, 2024, in San Jose, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)



Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose debuted their outdoor Exploration Portal with preschoolers from Educare California at Silicon Valley taking the honeycomb exhibit for a test run, Friday, June 21, 2024, in San Jose, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)



Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose debuted their outdoor Exploration Portal with preschoolers from Educare California at Silicon Valley taking the honeycomb exhibit for a test run, Friday, June 21, 2024, in San Jose, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)



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Darcy Ly, 6, opens an interactive California poppy exhibit at the new outdoor Exploration Portal debuting at the Children's Discovery Museum of San Jose, Friday, June 21, 2024, in San Jose, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

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