

# DISCOVERY CENTER MUSEUM TOT SPOT FRAMEWORK

**BACKGROUND.** Tot Spot is Discovery Center's special place for children birth through kindergarten. Since Discovery Center opened its doors in Riverfront Museum Park (Rockford, IL), Tot Spot has served as an entry experience for children and families exploring science and art. Its developmentally engaging and challenging experiences have invited infants, toddlers and preschoolers to do what they do naturally and do best: learn about their world by exploring with their hands, senses and bodies, supported by adults who care about them. Tot Spot has helped grow Discovery Center's explorers and learners and has accommodated families with children in a wide age range. It was apparent that Tot Spot had been well loved and well used. Some areas were under-utilized and exhibits with limited attraction had been removed; other areas were crowded. Still some components worked well but would need replacement soon.

**PROCESS.** Discovery Center chose to take the occasion of its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary and its "Connecting Our Future" capital campaign to revisit Tot Spot, its role within the Museum and its potential to more fully serve young children and families. Planning by staff, board and community supporters and facilitated by museum planning consultant, Jeanne W. Vergeront (Minneapolis, MN) consolidated Discovery Center's past experience serving young children and integrated it with the Center's expansion vision to:

- identify how to serve age groups within a designated early childhood range as well as the adults who visit with them;
- provide for an integrated approach to Discovery Center's early childhood exhibits, programs and partnerships; and
- frame a new round of compelling exhibits that advances Discovery Center's early learning interests.

**RESULTS.** The resulting Tot Spot Master Plan included a learning framework, new exhibit concepts, and space lay-out for all the Tot Spot activities. Supporting Discovery Center's mission to *create opportunities for joyful learning and discovery through hands-on experience in science and art*, Tot Spot's purpose will be to:

Spark children's interest in the ways and whys of their world by engaging their natural curiosity in the building blocks of science and art through play and exploration with the adults who care about them.

Planning provided a sharpened sense of young children's developmental capabilities, identifying three groups: birth - 18 months, 18 months - 3 years and 3 - 6 years. As a more robust gateway experience for learning about science and art, Tot Spot will concentrate on offering experiences in three areas that are consistent with young children's exploration: *Everyday sensory and visual elements; Principles and processes of everyday materials, media and tools; and Relationships between people, places, objects, and ideas.*

Nearly double in size, the new Tot Spot carries forward the strengths and successes of the existing early childhood space and its exhibits while offering a wider range and greater variety of learning and play experiences. Activities in eleven exhibit areas will engage children in exploratory play, creative expression, and problem solving. Targeted experiences will encourage adult engagement, supporting, and expanding awareness about early science and art learning.