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# A Piloting Process

**Hands On!’s president Lyn Wood** recently invited Jo Haas, the executive director of the Kentucky Science Center, to reflect on the thinking that led to the permanent new exhibition that is Science in Play®. In this first excerpt from that wide-ranging conversation, Jo and Lyn discuss the process of building a major new exhibition through pilot stages.

## LYN:

Our process of developing Science in Play® together took about 4 years, on purpose. It was very experimental and iterative. First you asked us to create a large-scale temporary pilot installation that you could observe and evaluate. Then, based on those learnings, we modified, created additions and installed a second temporary pilot for further study. Why did you initiate this process and how did it benefit the planning of the permanent, much larger version?

## JO:

Strategically, we wanted to really make more of an early childhood statement than we were making. We knew we wanted that to take shape in a permanent gallery that was different than the type of experience we had offered to visitors for the last 20 or 30 years. But, we weren’t ready for the type of investment that it would take to do what we ultimately did in the permanent Science in Play®.

You know, I’m a pretty impatient person so, in some ways, piloting was a way to get some momentum going. Let’s show people what we’re thinking! Let’s bring that to a scale that will get donors excited. Let’s introduce this new way of thinking about early learning to our team so when we do it “for real,” we’re ready for it. So, we took funds that we would normally have invested in traveling exhibitions and instead diverted them to these two full-scale testing versions of Science in Play®.

**LYN:**

This was a first for us. We've, of course, done a lot of prototyping, but we've never piloted a full exhibition this way. The two pilots were about 7,000 square feet each.

That certainly allowed you to learn a lot, right? We definitely did.

**JO:**

We learned a ton! We learned a lot ourselves, we learned a lot with you, and we learned a lot from visitors, partners and stakeholders. We pretty quickly assembled an early childhood advisory team and worked with them along the way. We had some special needs advocates that were brought into the loop early, too. And we used those pilot installations to court donors and raised three million dollars.

One of our donors said, "I love that you're living your mission," which is a great way to think about what we were doing. As institutions, we talk a lot about being all for curiosity and experimentation, process and testing, trying, stretching, dreaming. You could find those words in mission statements for science centers all over the globe. What we decided to do here at the Kentucky Science Center was really try to live that mission of experimentation ourselves. "Let's try it!"



**LYN:**

Certainly for us it was very experiential. We had to think, create, act, observe, react in that same kind of experiential way that kids go about doing science. It was exciting to play with ideas, see their impact on visitors, and work with you and your staff to improve that experience. Now that the permanent Science in Play® is open, do you think this piloting process resulted in a different kind of exhibition?

**JO:**

Our process gave all of us the time to discover and understand the brand of this experience, how it relates to the larger brand of the Kentucky Science Center, how it can support what's going on in our state with relation to early childhood, how it should reflect the priorities of our community, how it can empower parents, and how it serves as a springboard for connecting us to all those constituencies.

What's interesting is that if you took some of the things that are in Science in Play® out of this context and looked at them in an isolated way, you may not grasp the innovation or the progressive nature of what we have here. But this piloting process means we spent lots of time maturing the “system” in which those experiences live. A person might think, “Oh, those are just Imagination Playground blocks. Those are all over.” But once you put something like that, or the more unique components—the Grow Zone, the Shapes & Stuff Store, the Science Depot—into that system, they become something more. We think we can really own this notion of progressive early childhood experience in the science center world, because it is pretty distinctively different in aggregate.



**LYN:**

I think the process that you chose gave us the opportunity to grow that system and find the adjacencies, connections and layers that create a multidimensional experience.

**JO:**

Yes, when you look at the beautiful way that all of you at Hands On! helped us envision the connective tissue—all of the branding, and the look and feel of the galleries, and the materials selection, all of that—you have something pretty powerful. We could have just sent you off and said that we wanted an early childhood gallery of 11,000 square feet and here's our budget, go at it. And I believe we would have gotten something great and beautiful, but it wouldn't necessarily be as responsive to who we are and what we are trying to do as Science in Play® is because of this process.

**LYN:**

You wanted parents to see their children as scientists and capable learners. How do you think the design we created together for Science in Play® helps parents engage in that kind of thinking?

**JO:**

Communication is important, but it's also as fundamental as the material selection. If we want parents, grandparents, teachers and mentors to engage with children, how do we make this something that adults want to do? One of our collective strategies was making sure that the materials aren't those typical preschool colors or those typical preschool plastics. We made sure there's a sophisticated air about them that works for both kids and adults. And you can see the success of those choices—adults that are building roller coasters with their kids, who are climbing in the climber with their kids, who are shopping and imaging with their kids in the Shapes & Stuff Store. The quality of those experiences is awesome.



**LYN:**

When I was there, there was a palpable sense of commitment from your staff to this experience. Do you think that's a direct outcome of this piloting process?

**JO:**

Had we not gone through this process, we would just not have had the level of engagement, buy-in, pride and excitement that we have across this institution. This type of process invited people to be with us along the way, be involved, have opinions, try ideas. The result is a real sense of commitment from more than just me, or just a small project team, that you can feel very viscerally.

**LYN:**

So what was the most thrilling part of the process for you?

**JO:**

Opening! The most gratifying thing is standing down there and watching happen what we hoped would happen, and seeing not only kids engaged, but also parents who aren't sitting on their phones, who are engaged with hands-on involvement, body-on involvement, clearly aware of what's going on with their kids. We know children learn best when they're learning with others, especially adults, so to see that going on every day is totally cool.

**We haven't stopped learning from Science in Play®! Stay tuned for the next conversation in this series, when Lyn and Jo discuss the Shapes & Stuff Store and the way it helps kids build 21st century learning skills through the power of play.**

