



Photography © Oscar Williams

Playing with Communication Strategies

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 third excerpt from that wide-ranging conversation, Jo and Lyn discuss the process of developing the varied communication elements throughout Science in Play®.

LYN

Let's talk about the communication elements—the graphics—in Science in Play®. As with so many other things on this project, you decided to do things differently, starting with your philosophy about the process of development and the purpose of communicating.

JO

There's this idea of a typical client-vendor relationship, right? We say we're doing an exhibit on X and we need all these exhibit devices and all the interpretive materials and everything delivered to us and installed. And it isn't that the client doesn't approve things or provide direction, particularly on things like signage, but it is more typical that the signage relates very explicitly to what the device is and how it works and how people work with it.

But in this particular instance, we felt personally invested in what we wanted this communication strategy to be and how it was going to support, in a very personal way, people in our community—parents, grandparents, caregivers, teachers of very young children. Inasmuch as we wanted to create a great place for those people to play and learn together, we wanted to create this interpretive piece that really supported them and their needs. It's very hard to describe, but we felt like we were investing ourselves in this communication strategy on an entirely different level than I felt on some other exhibit graphics projects.

LYN

To me, when I look at some of the signage and communication elements, it feels like a gesture when someone walks up to me and puts their hand on my shoulder and gives me a bit of encouragement.

JO

Yes, it was very personal. It was almost a first-person voice, not in every instance but in lots of ways, it was very conversational and very supportive. That's a great way to put it.

LYN

Do you want to talk about the Cone Signs? These were freestanding signs throughout specific areas to give prompts to the adults, to the caregivers, at different parts of the exhibit experience, like the Roller Coaster area. You were going to use this project to build your internal capacity; there was no question about that. And these Cone Signs took quite an evolution.



JO

You're right. If we go from start to finish, there were three different versions of these signs. You guys and our early childhood consultant Jeanne Vergeront did the heavy lifting on the first version. There was a much more collaborative writing process on the second version. And then on the third version we really took on writing the signs, so there was this developmental and capacity building. What's also interesting for me is that, functionally, those signs evolved pretty substantially.

LYN

We were really trying to tie the type of play behavior to a science concept in that first version.

JO

In a traditional sense, these signs would tell you what to do. I walk up to the Roller Coaster, what do I do? I walk up to the Noodle Forest, the Mirror Maze, the Airways, what do I do? But I was trying to resist the urge to tell people anything about what they should do, because I wanted children and their families, and groups and individuals, to have highly open-ended experiences that could lead them wherever they wanted to go, even in ways they weren't imagining.

So the first approach had a prompt and a little bit of science content in the Science in Play® 1.0 version. If you were an adult standing with your child at the Roller Coaster area, it was a bit about momentum, or some other science depending on where you were.

LYN

Yes.

JO

Then we learned from parents, "We don't care about the science, man!" They actually said that to us. And after being offended for a moment, we said, "Okay, I get that." So we dropped all of that in SIP 2.0 and said, "Okay, if you don't care about the science, we're still going to try to introduce you to what it is your child might be gaining in terms of school readiness skills."

LYN

It's almost as if you were, in a gentle, light touch way, modeling how they could prompt and interact.

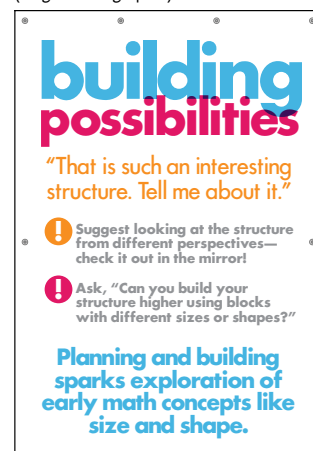
JO

Yes, because parents said to us that they don't know how to take something their child does when they're playing and build on that as a learning experience.

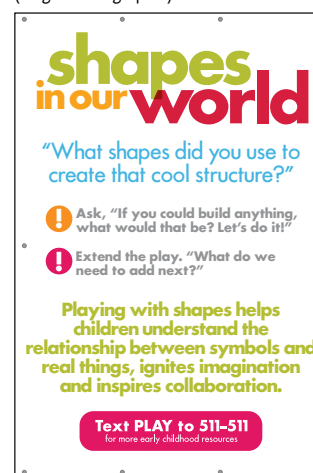
Big Build Cone Sign: Version 1.0 (double-sided graphic)



Big Build Cone Sign: Version 2.0 (single-sided graphic)



Big Build Cone Sign: Final Version (single-sided graphic)



LYN

So you had some modeling prompts as if you, Jo, were standing there enriching the experience between you and the youngster, and then there was this little hint that those things, in life, are useful.

JO

And why they are useful and why these kinds of skills matter to your child. In Kentucky, there's a great emphasis on kindergarten readiness, so we used a tool—and there are probably very similar tools being used all over the country—that helps adults know what school readiness means. It doesn't mean just knowing your alphabet, knowing your colors. There are social/emotional sides to it, physical and health and well-being dimensions of school readiness. There are language and communication dimensions. There's even the dimension of how a child might approach learning. Is the child curious? Can they focus on things? Can they continue to pursue tasks that are challenging for them? All these school readiness dimensions became the framework and infrastructure behind the ultimate communication strategy throughout the gallery.

Using that school readiness matrix was our most substantial transition once we heard from parents that, first and foremost, “My biggest challenge is not trying to tell my child what a mirror is and what it does. My biggest challenge is knowing how to take play behaviors and build on them so that I'm supporting my child's learning in the broadest sense and in the most meaningful way.”

By the time we got to the permanent version, some of the Cone Signs stayed the same. We added some and refined a few, but that transition from the play and science alignment to school readiness was really a transition we found very successful from Science in Play® 1.0 to Science in Play® 2.0, and we used that as the model moving forward to the final graphics.

LYN

Are you getting good feedback?

JO

Yes, parents love the level of information and the tone and the engagement of that information. We've gotten very positive feedback.

We also added a texting campaign so you could get to the science via our website. If you're really into the Roller Coaster or the Color and Light Area and you want to know more about what the science is, you can use a text code to find your way to our website. That's one of those areas that, as with every dimension of Science in Play®, we're still fleshing out. We're not exactly where we want to be with that website, but it's a great living and breathing added attribute.

making predictions

“Wow! You designed your own roller coaster!”

- ! Ask, “How can you change the tracks to make the ball go faster? Slower? Farther?”
- ! Make a new prediction and work together to create a new design.

Predicting and testing are strategies your child can learn to solve problems.

Text PLAY to 511-511
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LYN

Let's talk about the trajectory of the environmental graphics in Science in Play® 1.0, where we did kind of playful, cartoony graphics, to what ultimately ended up in the Science in Play® permanent, which was real world photography and connections.

JO

We commissioned some research about communicating with young children from our partners at University of Louisville College of Education, and they came back with that body of research between SIP 1.0 and SIP 2.0. There were a handful of things that came out of that, and one of them was this central theme of context that echoed something that Jeanne Vergeront had also said—that it's so important for early learners and young children in learning environments to have context for what it is that they're learning. Where we landed was this approach to real world graphics to give kids context for the experiences but not tying those experiences in a prescribed way to that context.

LYN

So, for example, in the Shapes & Stuff Store™, if you see a photo that's familiar like watermelon and we outline and call out the shapes in it . . .

JO

Then it draws a connection for that child to something that they have experience with and creates a context for them.

LYN

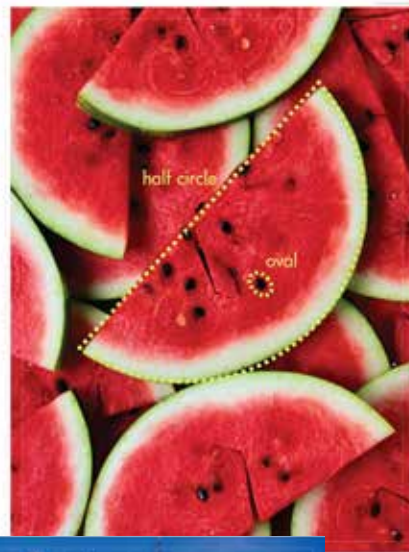
Another example is Build Your World, where we used real, local bridges as large-scale wall images, but embedded the photographs with graphic images of the big blue blocks to look like they're part of the bridges, suggesting that you can use those blocks to build real-world things.

JO

The beautiful thing about that is that not only is it an object that you might have some familiarity with, but it's also something that's happening right in your own backyard. So, in several of those instances we've really grounded, through the graphics, children and families in their own neighborhoods. Whether it's the Belle of Louisville steamboat, or the Ohio River Bridges Project, or the science center building itself, there's that level of familiar context.

LYN

The piloting process allowed us to relax and play with ideas and percolate, then craft this more informed idea about real-world context that didn't force us to make a real grocery store, but instead embed a very different store experience with real-world imagery.





JO

The other thing I was going to say about real world graphics versus the sort of cartoonish approach is that all along the way one of the design parameters—and our overall design intent—had been to treat children, even young children, and their families with a respect and level of seriousness through material choices that were sophisticated. And I think the real world graphic piece, in my mind, goes right along with that, because you're not contriving things or fabricating something. These are really awesome things that you see in your world. Some of them are very simple and some of them you see with more frequency, like a watermelon, and some of them are more fanciful and unique, like the amusement park picture in the Shapes & Stuff Store™, but they're real things, and we're respecting the fact that you have the ability to put yourself in that real world and learn from that real world.

LYN

I remember an early-on description of these young visitors as “capable and confident,” and you saying that you really respected that, and that's why this took this kind of turn.

JO

Yeah, and it also encourages, at another level, the adult caregivers. It maybe inspires them. Everywhere you look in your world, there's something you can be learning!

LYN

It sort of insinuates itself in that way, so that the next time you cross the bridge with your child you can say, “Hey, let’s talk about the shapes in this bridge and how they go together.”

JO

Exactly. Everywhere you’re going with your child, you can have conversations about the things that are all around you. And we don’t explicitly say that, but I also think that’s one of the beauties of the space. It’s inspiring and intriguing on a different level.

LYN

In the permanent iteration, we were going to provide a lot of bench seating throughout just as an element of comfort, but I remembered the Natural History Museum in Paris, which had these slots and panels in its benches; you could pull out a panel and get bits of information about the flora and fauna as you were sitting there. So we designed a system for you that was incorporated into your benches that people could easily pick up—a simple exploration that was in addition to other content they got. Do you want to talk about your intent for taking advantage of those?

JO

What we hoped is that as people might be pausing and sitting—at the Happy Climber is a great example, the Smart Car, the Big Build Area, places where the kids might be for quite a while—there would be a little something that intrigues the adult. They could pull out a Bench Tip and set it on their lap, glance at it, almost as if it’s a Twitter feed of short information. It would be something they could digest very quickly, just a little pointer, or a little twist on how you might look at something, or a little nugget of inspiration.

After a lot of design conversations internally and also with our KET TV partners, who do a lot of work in the early childhood area, we landed on our system, our organizing principle. At every bench, one of the tips would relate to something fun at home, one of the tips would be about success in school, and one of the tips would fit under the umbrella of “Something New.” There were a few words on one side and a picture that would reinforce that concept on the other side. So, it wasn’t like you picked something up and had all this stuff you had to read or felt a lot of pressure to ponder; it was something that was designed to be much more quick, interesting and inspiring, and you could move on.

LYN

It was definitely like Twitter in their snappy length, which fit great on a small 10” x 10” panel that’s easy to pick up and hold. You and your team chose wonderful real world photographs for each one.



JO

They were real photographs of kids and adults engaged in doing something that's related to the theme. For encouraging pretend play, the photo is this kid sitting in a cardboard box that's souped up like a race car—just quick reminders about how to engage with your child in unexpected and different ways, to have the space or materials to inspire pretend play, to help them see the world differently, engage in some new or unique way, have a little fun, and ultimately be prepared for success in school.

LYN

You guys absolutely committed to that. We gave you the mechanism and the format, but you rolled up your sleeves and tackled all of them. There were 36 of them, so that was a big effort.

JO

I love nothing more than walking in there and seeing somebody pick one up. It warms my heart! And we do see that. We see people sitting and looking at them, or they're lying on the bench, so we do know that they get used. And they're not so onerous that we couldn't do a whole fresh set in a year if we decided to.

LYN

Right, they're an inexpensive change-out, which is the way they were designed.

Do you want to talk about the Do Science Everywhere campaign and how that came about? When we started experimenting with these Science in Play® pilots, we hadn't leveraged that campaign, but ultimately it became apparent that it was a really good and appropriate thing that we could play off in large scale throughout the final version of Science in Play®.

JO

By then, we had really matured the Do Science Everywhere campaign through some of our Grow Up Great with Science work that was funded by PNC Bank. Through that work, which was really about community organizing and community activation, we had been doing outreach to organizations and to children and

“I love nothing more than walking in there and seeing somebody pick one up. It warms my heart!”

—Jo Haas

families in that early childhood space using the Do Science Everywhere framework. We had a whole series of activity cards that we had been developing around themes like Do Science in Kitchen, Do Science at the Hardware Store, Do Science in the Bathtub, Do Science at the Park. All of those themes existed with this array of very iconic imagery. And thank god for those original design principles! I think all the way back to that earliest conversation when we kicked this project off 4+ years ago, and we said we want to harness our existing assets—defined in a pretty broad way—and that Do Science Everywhere platform was one of those assets. I'm not sure that we ever really thought about the visual assets being used in the way that we ultimately used them, but, wow, that was a great moment when that occurred, wasn't it?

LYN

It was a sort of “Eureka!” We knew they were assets but we hadn't employed them in Science in Play® 1.0 or 2.0. Early on as we launched the Science in Play® permanent version, we just looked at each other across the room and thought, “Oh yeah, Do Science Everywhere should be a big visual part of this.” It adds a pretty strong element and even influenced how the Happy Climber turned out. Because all the Do Science Everywhere campaigns had these really charming, fun, intriguing happy faces embedded in them. It was a very friendly campaign—this friendly encouragement to get engaged with your child no matter where you are.

JO

Again, it invites that act of looking closely at what's around you and seeing something surprising in something familiar. I love that juxtaposition when you just kind of glance and you see a cutting board with a bunch of flour on it, but then you see a smiley face. You can almost imagine yourself in a bathtub full of bubbles and taking your finger and making a smiley face in it. It's very engaging and playful and accessible and inspiring, and I love all those attributes. And it's clean; it's not cluttered. It says a lot with hardly any words at all.





LYN

On an operational level, we built in some flexible systems so you can do your own graphics on a daily basis. Like in the Shapes & Stuff Store™, you can have “shapes sales” and whatnot, and in the Science Depot you can have different challenges. How is that working for you?

JO

Good. And, as with the texting campaign, we’re continuing to grow into these things and experiment and that’s the whole point of those flexible systems. We had a great conversation a month or so ago. We had just done a reset in the Science Depot, and it was an engineering/building theme. One of the visual prompts was a very explicit house structure. That prompted us to have a lot of good conversation about how to inspire the right level of open-endedness and creativity in your activity prompts so that you’re not just getting kids to recreate what you’ve created. I love the fact that these things are prompting us to refine our own pedagogy and our own approach and thinking. These flexible systems like the white boards and the binder clips with the labels are offering us even more opportunities to learn and experiment ourselves. And the fact that there are things that are allowing us to grow and change and evolve is really exciting and meaningful.

