

# Schools can't do it all; visit local museums

**T**he recent editorial, "Let's get smart about education priorities," urged Hoosiers to make education and academic achievement their highest concern. I couldn't agree more and am writing to suggest ways outside of school to bolster academic success.

Incredibly rich museum opportunities are available to Central Indiana families to support their children's education. By taking children to museums, parents and guardians encourage personal interests, supplement classroom instruction, and model enthusiasm for lifelong learning.

Research conducted at Conner Prairie offers specific examples of how parental involvement can play out. With assistance from the University of Indianapolis and Ball State University, researchers studied more than 100 family visits. We interviewed families at the start of their visits about their expectations, audio-taped conversations throughout tours, and then debriefed at the end.

We found that family conversation provided a window onto



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### MY VIEW

learning. For our part, we found that learning needed museum staff who made visitors feel welcome, comfortable and who could engage the entire family in conversation. We changed dramatically; now Conner Prairie arms frontline staff with a "toolbox" of hands-on and minds-on ways to start conversation and engage children and adults.

Our research also showed that parents' expectations of visits played an important role. When parents had an idea about how and why the museum visit might interest their children, when they allowed their children to express personal interests, and when they encouraged children to share expertise rather than always taking on the role of expert themselves, the entire family got more out of the visit. "My kids have been learning about the Pilgrims in school," one father explained. "I thought they might want to see what it's like to live without electricity." A mother said, "My daughter just started reading 'Little House on the Prairie' books. We came today because she is so into those books." Another mother said, "My 6-year-old son is fascinated by the Civil

War. I'm not sure how he came upon his interest, but I thought we should come (to Conner Prairie's Civil War Weekend) so he could find out more."

The Indianapolis area is rich with places to stimulate curiosity and enrich classroom learning. With Conner Prairie, The Children's Museum, the Indianapolis Zoo and the Indiana State Museum, just to name a few rich learning opportunities in the area, parents can provide experiences that engage, excite and stimulate interest on a wide range of curriculum-related areas such as state history, dinosaurs, geography, conservation and ecology.

Parents who know their children's interests and personalities can individualize visits in ways not possible during field trips. Family visits build children's frameworks for understanding the world — frameworks that support and provide fertile soil for seeds planted in the classroom.

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