

BFK Rocket Report



Play • Imagination • Inclusion • Connection • Integrity



A Strong Foundation

Investing in early childhood is one of the most powerful ways to shape a thriving community. By supporting children in their earliest years, the Building for Kids aims to create a strong foundation of impact that benefits families, schools, and the broader community for generations to come.

At the heart of this foundation is our Early Childhood Continuum, a series of free programs that harnesses the power of intergenerational, play-based learning to support, empower, and connect caregivers and their young children. The Continuum begins with the **Welcome Baby Community** for first-time parents and infants, transitions into **Early Explorers** for toddlers and their caregivers, and culminates in **Jr. Explorers**—a drop-off program for kids ages 3 and 4.

These programs not only strengthen families but also address urgent challenges in our community. The pandemic disrupted early learning opportunities, leaving many children without critical social experiences. The Continuum helps close these gaps by creating environments where children learn to grow confidence, interact with peers, and adapt to new settings.

“When kids enter programs like [Jr. Explorers], you see a wide variety of things start to happen,” said Carla Jones, Speech Language Pathologist at the Appleton Area School District. “They really blossom in their social-emotional competencies, they become more independent, and they become more comfortable being away from their parents for the first time.”



In addition to helping children develop critical skills, the Early Childhood Continuum also connects families to resources—and each other. Breanna Mekuly, City of Appleton Community Health Supervisor, has noted trends from the Community Health Needs Assessment of reduced access to basic needs and increasing feelings of loneliness and isolation among families. Our programs help address these challenges by offering free childcare opportunities, linking parents to community resources, and creating spaces where families in similar life stages can connect. Many participants leave with new friendships and greater confidence in accessing the support available throughout the community.

Since its launch in 2020, our Early Childhood Continuum has impacted over 11,000 participants, and we’re excited to keep expanding these opportunities and reach more people every year.



Family Spotlight: The Skowanderson Family

One family who has experienced the impact of our Early Childhood Continuum firsthand is the Skowandersons.

The Skowandersons were first introduced to Jr. Explorers in 2024, when they were looking for something to challenge their now 5-year-old daughter. Seeing how much their daughter loved the program, they enrolled their son in our current session of Jr. Explorers.

Kristina Skowanderson explained that her son was initially anxious about separating from a parent, so she was worried about how he would adjust to making friends and being more independent.

Continue the story on Page 2 →

The Skowanderson Family's Story

(Continued from front page)

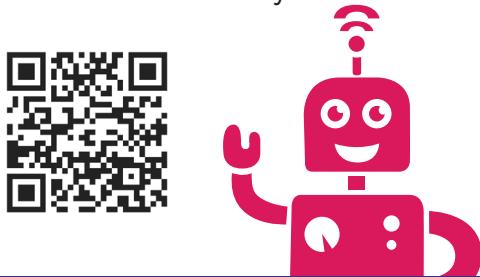
However, since starting the program, she has watched him confidently build friendships, explore on his own, and grow in a new environment.

"We had a few tears on our first days, but so far, my son has thrived," said Kristina. "He's now excited to go and wakes up in the morning and asks when he gets to go to Jr. Explorers."

For Kristina, Jr. Explorers has not only offered learning opportunities for her kids, but also a sense of community. The program has allowed her family to connect with others in similar stages of life and build relationships that extend beyond the museum.

"I believe it's one of the best programs our community has to offer," Kristina said. "I can't wait to have my youngest daughter join when she turns three because I know she will love it."

Watch our Early Childhood Continuum video below to listen to more stories of impact like the Skowanderson family's.



Your Gift has Twice the Impact!

Thanks to the generosity of the Morgridge Family Foundation, donations made to our Annual Appeal for a limited time will be matched dollar-for-dollar, up to \$50,000. Scan the QR code to learn more about our Annual Appeal, Building Blocks of Impact, and how to make a donation.



Celebrate the Holidays with Us!

Pizza with the Grinch | December 5 & 12

The Grinch is planning a few special stops at the Building for Kids! Join us from 5 - 7pm for pizza, Grinch-themed activities, after-hours playtime, storytimes, and plenty of opportunities to meet the Grinch. Don't forget to wear your holiday or Grinch-inspired outfits!

Families also have an opportunity to meet the Grinch in a lower-sensory environment on Wednesday, December 10 from 5 - 7pm. To accommodate various sensory needs, this event will have dimmer lighting, no music, and certain exhibits turned off.

Winter Break Theme Days | December 26 - 31

To celebrate no school over winter break, we'll feature a new theme at the museum every day! Plus, we're extending our hours to include Monday, December 29. Check out our exciting line-up of themes:

- Friday, December 26: Olympic Trials at the BFK
- Saturday, December 27: Family Renaissance Faire
- Sunday, December 28: Clay Day
- Monday, December 29: Kid's Dance Party
- Tuesday, December 30: Summer Bash in December
- Wednesday, December 31: BFK New Year



Annual Appeal: Building Blocks of Impact

Our Annual Appeal is a critical fundraising effort that amplifies the reach and impact of our work. Contributions to our Annual Appeal directly support our Building Blocks of Impact, which are important initiatives designed to make lasting positive change in our community. These not only include our Early Childhood Continuum but also our after school and summer programming as well as access scholarships and other initiatives that remove barriers to play-based learning.

We hope you will consider helping us invest in the next generation and build a thriving community by making a gift towards our Annual Appeal today!



BFK New Year | December 31

Plan to welcome 2026 at the BFK! On Wednesday, December 31 from 9am - 4pm, we're hosting our annual BFK New Year event, complete with themed activities all day long. Create your own musical instruments and noisemakers in The Studio, join lively parades throughout the museum, and get ready for confetti-filled countdowns and ball drops!

Scan the QR code to learn more or register for our holiday-themed events!

A Statewide Commitment to Play

This month, our team attended the Wisconsin Children's Museum fall conference at the Above & Beyond Children's Museum in Sheboygan.

This annual gathering is an incredible opportunity for our staff to connect with passionate museum professionals from across the state, exchange ideas, and discuss how we can build a stronger network of children's museums in Wisconsin.

We're grateful for opportunities like this to learn, grow, and bring back fresh ideas that will help us best serve kids and their grown-ups at the Building for Kids.



Director's Digest

Thirty-three years ago, my parents' and grandparents' generation built this fantastic organization with the vision of creating a space in our community where kids and families could learn through play. As a young child, I got to experience the gift of this museum for myself, and it remained an important part of my life as I grew older. I spent much of my teens and twenties working at the museum, engaging with visitors, and witnessing firsthand how this place touches lives and enriches families every day. Now, as a parent, I've had the privilege of sharing this gift with my own children and watching them experience the same joy and curiosity I felt when I visited as a child.

Today, I am proud to see the impact of the Building for Kids continue to grow, reaching more families and strengthening the broader community. Current initiatives like our Early Childhood Continuum help families leverage the powerful tool of intergenerational, play-based learning to grow, explore, and connect with each other. The Continuum not only prepares children for success but strengthens families and creates ripple effects that benefit our entire community.

The impact we make today is only possible because of the incredible team behind the Building for Kids, which extends far beyond our dedicated staff. That team started thirty-three years ago with our founders, supporters, and countless volunteers who dedicated their time, energy, and resources to bring their vision to life. That team grows every day with people like you—our members, visitors, donors, and partners—who all play an important role in shaping the future of this organization.

As we look ahead, we need your support to ensure that the next generation has access to the critical opportunities offered by the Building for Kids. I invite you to join us in stewarding this important community asset by making a gift to our Annual Appeal. Your generosity is especially impactful today thanks to the Morgridge Family Foundation's matching challenge going on now. Their \$50,000 match—inspired by



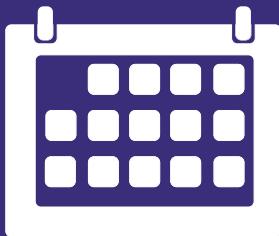
their own visits to the museum and belief in the power of play-based learning—means every dollar you donate will go twice as far. Learn more by scanning the QR code on page 2 or contacting me directly.

Alongside your critical support of our Annual Appeal, you may also consider joining other inspiring leaders in the Dr. John and Sally Mielke Bold Hearts Legacy Circle—a group that ensures the museum continues serving kids and families for generations to come through planned and endowment gifts. Please feel free to reach out to me personally if you would like to start the conversation about joining.

I hope you will join us in our commitment to pass on the gift of play-based learning to future generations. Thank you for being a valuable part of our team.

Oliver Zornow
President
ozornow@buildingforkids.org





Calling All Teens!

Youth Advisory Group

All 5th – 10th graders are invited to join our Youth Advisory Group, a committee designed to give youth an opportunity to make an impact on the Building for Kids! Throughout the remainder of the school year, this group will meet monthly to collaborate on real projects that shape our programs, exhibits, and other offerings.

Who: 5th – 10th grade students
When: Third Tuesday of each month from 6:30 – 7:30pm

Learn more and apply:



Teen's Night Out

On Thursday, December 11 from 6:30 – 8:30pm, the BFK is hosting our very first teen night in partnership with This is Improv! During this free event, teens are invited to socialize, play, and participate in workshops.

This is a free event, but we ask that you register in advance.

Learn more and register:



For more information about these and other upcoming events, visit buildingforkids.org.

Board Spotlight

Zeb Rutter

Incoming Member of the BFK Board

Why did you join the BFK Board?

Over the past several years, I've had the privilege of serving on the Building for Kids' Marketing and Communications Committee. In that role, I've supported the BFK team by helping shape marketing strategy, offering feedback, and serving as a sounding board for new ideas. Joining the Board felt like a natural next step to deepen my commitment and continue contributing in a more strategic capacity. I'm passionate about the BFK's mission to inspire learning through play, and I'm excited to offer my time and talents to help the organization grow and thrive.

What are you looking forward to about being on the Board?

I'm most looking forward to collaborating with the incredibly talented and passionate individuals who make up the Building for Kids Board of Directors, as well as the dedicated BFK team. It's inspiring to be part of a group that shares a deep commitment to the success of the BFK and its mission. I'm excited to contribute, learn from others, and work together to help the organization continue to grow and make a lasting impact in our community.

How has the BFK impacted your life?

As a father of a young son, the Building for Kids has been a meaningful part of our family's journey. It's been a go-to destination since his toddler years, becoming a place



we've explored, learned, and made lasting memories together. I have loved seeing his eyes light up when we've attended character days, watching his curiosity grow when puzzling through how to guide a ball through a maze of tubes, and observing him making fast friends with the other kids. It's a place that's brought joy to our family, and that personal connection is a big part of why I'm passionate about supporting the BFK's mission.

Why does the BFK matter to our community?

The Building for Kids is a cornerstone of the Appleton community. The mission to inspire creativity and lifelong learning through play is essential to the future success not only of our community, but to inspire other communities as well. By providing hands-on, engaging experiences for children and families, the BFK helps nurture curiosity, confidence, and connection. It's a space where future generations begin to discover what they're capable of, and that makes it invaluable to our community.

Board of Directors

Kristen Trimberger, *Chair* - Reach Counseling

Ethan Haas, *Vice Chair* - Amcor

Barb Gonnering, *Treasurer* - Wipfli LLP

Amanda Chavez, *Secretary* - Go Valley Kids

Eric Lempke, *Past Chair* - BMO Harris Bank, N.A.

Juan Arellano - AZCO, Inc.

Bob DeKoch - The Boldt Group

James Fenlon - U.S. AutoForce

Alicia Frank - United Way Fox Cities

Tom Hardwick - SECURA Insurance Companies

Jamie Hess - KBX Logistics

Michael McCormick - Schreiber Foods

Debra McDowell - Community Leader

Timber Smith - City of Appleton

Dr. Abby Smolcich - ThedaCare

Dr. Carrie Willer - Appleton Area School District

Garrett Zimmerman - Shiocton School District



100 W College Ave • Appleton, WI 54911 • 920-734-3226 • buildingforkids.org