BFK Rocket Report

Play • Imagination • Inclusion • Connection • Integrity

Innovation in the Pursuit of Play

Play has always been at the heart of everything we do at the Building for Kids because we know it is one of the most powerful ways children learn. Through play, kids ask questions, test ideas, solve problems, and develop the skills they'll carry with them for life. While these experiences happen every day inside the museum, our commitment to play extends far beyond our building. Read on to learn about how the BFK is innovating in the pursuit of play through efforts like *Curiosity Classrooms*, *A Play-Based Community*, *Launchpad Playful Preschool*, and the *Wisconsin Children's Museum Alliance*.

Curiosity Classrooms

One way we're innovating in the pursuit of play is by embedding play into core systems like schools. **Curiosity Classrooms**, powered by the Building for Kids, are thoughtfully designed STEAM learning environments that help students build confidence in science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics through hands-on play.

These classrooms give young learners a dedicated place to follow their curiosity. Featuring a variety of museum-quality interactive spaces, the classrooms encourage students and educators to explore topics together, using inquiry, experimentation, and open-ended discovery to guide learning. Participating schools incorporate the classrooms into the school day, allowing students across multiple grades to return to the space regularly and build skills through ongoing exploration. While in the *Curiosity Classroom*, students might test to see how different materials fly in a wind





tunnel, construct ramp systems for balls and cars, experiment with light and shadow, and much more.

This year, the BFK is bringing Wisconsin's first *Curiosity Classrooms* to area schools through our collaboration with the Chicago Children's Museum, where the model was originally developed. We recently installed our first classroom at Stephen Foster Elementary Charter School in Appleton, and we will open another at Hillcrest Primary School in Shawano later this year. We look forward to growing the program and bringing the *Curiosity Classroom* model to even more students across the region.



A Play-Based Community

For more than three decades, the Building for Kids has created safe, thoughtful, and inspiring play-based learning environments that help kids develop critical lifelong skills. To expand access to these playful learning spaces, we created **A Play-Based Community**, an initiative that shares our expertise with local organizations to create engaging play environments throughout the community.

A Play-Based Community
powered by the Building KIDS children's museum

Through *A Play-Based Community*, we partner with organizations in our area to design spaces that reflect the unique needs of the children and families they serve. We begin with a series of listening sessions to understand the play patterns our partners hope to encourage, along with their aesthetic preferences, available space, and other priorities. We then leverage our network of expert fabricators, research-backed approach to child-directed play, and commitment to excellence and durability to help bring their vision to life.

In October, we installed our most recent play space for First 5 Fox Valley's Family Resource Center, providing kids with a place to play when their families visit the center. As *A Play-Based Community* continues to grow, we look forward to collaborating with more organizations to help extend the power of play.

First 5 Fox Valley



First 5 Fox Valley recently opened its new Family Resource Center, featuring a two-floor play space designed by the Building for Kids. Created as a welcoming space for families seeking services in the building, the nature-inspired play area encourages imaginative and social play while giving adults opportunities to connect.

The first floor is designed for kids under 6, with a climbing structure, tree wind tunnel, soft play campsite, dress-up clothes, and more. The second floor offers activities for older kids, including colorful light-up peg boards, a giant Electrosketch, board games, and an interactive that brings kids' drawings to life.



This fall marked the opening of **Launchpad Playful Preschool**, a new play-based preschool powered by the Building for Kids. Launchpad extends our mission beyond the museum by creating an educational environment where play isn't a break from learning but the foundation of it. By focusing on open-ended, child-directed learning experiences, Launchpad helps kids become curious, confident learners.

Scan the QR code to learn more and **enroll your child in Launchpad!**



The **Wisconsin Children's Museum Alliance** is a collaborative statewide destination brand led by the BFK that makes it easier for families to explore children's museums across the state! The Alliance includes 13 children's museums in Wisconsin united by a commitment to hands-on learning, creativity, family connection, and discovery through play. Visit the Alliance website to learn more about each museum, and follow along on social media for giveaways, special promotions, and family-friendly adventures across Wisconsin.

Scan the QR code to learn more about **Wisconsin Children's Museum Alliance!**

Fox Valley Family Friends

The early years of parenting are filled with learning, growth, and new experiences, and they're often best navigated alongside others who understand what you're experiencing. That's why the Building for Kids and our community partners recently launched **Fox Valley Family Friends**, a brand-new program that helps first-time parents connect with others who are at a similar stage of their parenting journeys.

If you're a new parent, you can sign up and find your Fox Valley Family Friend group! The program will match you with a small group of families who have babies around the same age, creating opportunities to connect through casual meet-ups, share advice, access resources, and build lasting friendships.

Scan the QR code to find your Fox Valley Family Friend group!

Director's Digest



Innovation in the pursuit of play has been the driving theme behind much of our work this year, inspiring us to explore several new ways to bring the power of play to more children and families across our community.

One way we've sought innovation is by launching *Curiosity Classrooms*, which make play a more intentional part of formal education. After touring model classrooms in Chicago, we began working with area elementary schools to bring that innovation here to Wisconsin. It was incredibly rewarding to witness the immediate excitement from both students and teachers when we unveiled our first Curiosity Classroom at Appleton's Foster Elementary earlier this fall.

Our efforts to find new ways to extend the impact of play also inspired *A Play-Based Community*. We recognize that not everyone is able to regularly take advantage of the BFK's play-based learning environment, so we created *A Play-Based Community* to meet families where they are, bringing intentionally designed play spaces to places where they regularly gather in our community. We're proud to have recently opened our largest play space to date at First 5 Fox Valley's Family Resource Center, right across the street from the BFK.

Our ability to continue spreading the impact of play through efforts like these would not be possible without people who care deeply about our mission and invest in helping us move it forward.

Few people have embodied that more than Bob DeKoch, a longtime leader in our community who recently passed away. For nearly 25 years, Bob served as a Board member and mentor to generations of leaders at all levels of the Building for Kids, including myself. He helped build a strong foundation for the organization, and his influence continues to shape our philosophy on leadership and innovation.

As the Board Chair during our critical expansion campaign in the early 2000s, Bob planted seeds that have continued to grow for decades. In his most recent book, *Leading with Care in a Tough World*, Bob highlighted his pride in the innovative organization the Building for Kids has proven to be. He then went on to help us ensure we continued this innovative pattern in our strategic planning, which has shaped much of the work we are celebrating today.

Now through the end of the year, the J.J. Keller Foundation will match new or increased donations, up to $1,000 per donor. Donate to our Annual Appeal and double your impact by scanning the QR code.

As an organization and a community, we all have the privilege of carrying on Bob's legacy by envisioning a community where play is a lifelong learning experience for all. As we approach the end of 2026, I hope you'll join us as we innovate in the pursuit of play with a gift to the Building for Kids Annual Appeal, made even more impactful through the J.J. Keller Foundation matching challenge.

Thank you for investing alongside us in our shared future!

Oliver Zornow
President
ozornow@buildingforkids.org





Upcoming Events

Pizza with the Grinch

December 4, 9, & 11: 5 - 7pm

Spend an evening at the Building for Kids with a very special holiday guest! This exclusive after-hours playdate features museum playtime, Grinch-themed activities, story times, pizza, and plenty of opportunities to meet the Grinch. Plus, families in the autism community are welcome to join us for our sensory-friendly playdate on Wednesday, December 9.

Winter Break at the BFK

December 23 - 30: 9am - 4pm

Make the BFK part of your winter break plans! We'll be celebrating all week long with a different theme and special activities each day:

- Outer Space
- Winter Wonderland
- All Things Clay
- Dino Day
- Jr. Chef
- STEM Olympics
- Summer in December

BFK New Year

December 31: 9am - 4pm

Help us ring in the New Year! Enjoy parades around the museum, countdowns, ball drops, and more!



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

Board Spotlight

Hayley Leisgang

Board Treasurer



Why did you join the BFK Board?

I joined the Board because of the BFK's dedication to creating a safe, supportive environment for children to learn and grow. The impact it makes on local families is inspiring, and I am honored to play a role in advancing that mission.

What do you enjoy most about being on the Board?

What I enjoy most is learning about children's development and hearing about it through the experiences and perspectives of others. Every Board member brings unique insights and a shared passion for helping children succeed.

What is the most rewarding part about being the Board Treasurer?

The most rewarding part of serving as Board Treasurer is having the opportunity to apply my financial background in ways that support the organization's mission. The role has given me a broader perspective on nonprofit operations and has allowed me to continue growing both professionally and personally.

Why does the BFK matter to our community?

Growing up in a town that didn't have a resource like this, I understand how important it is for families to have access to these opportunities. The organization not only supports children's development but also brings parents and families together, creating connections and a sense of community that extends far beyond its programs.

What is your favorite memory connected to the BFK?

My favorite memory would have to be attending the Appleton Christmas Parade at the BFK. It's a great opportunity to meet others within the organization and experience a little Christmas magic while you're there.

Board of Directors

Ethan Haas, *Chair* - Amcor
James Fenlon, *Vice Chair* - U.S. AutoForce
Hayley Leisgang, *Treasurer* - Wipfli LLP
Amanda Chavez, *Secretary* - Go Valley Kids
Kristen Trimberger, *Past Chair* - Reach Counseling
Alicia Frank - United Way Fox Cities
Barb Gonnering - Wipfli LLP
Debra McDowall - Community Leader
Zeb Rutter - SECURA Insurance
Tiffany Schramm - Petit & Dommershausen, S.C.
Timber Smith - City of Appleton
Dr. Abby Smolcich - ThedaCare
Mark Ver Voort - Boldt
Dr. Carrie Willer - Appleton Area School District
Garrett Zimmerman - School District of Shiocton