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### Kids Go Bats Over Bats

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Bartlett, Karol

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*by Karol Bartlett*

"They get in your hair and you have to get it all cut off!"

"They chase you and bite you and suck your blood."

These are just two of the comments children frequently make when asked what they know about bats. That is the reason The Children's Museum of Indianapolis developed a new exhibit called "BATS." The Children's Museum is the largest of its kind in the world, welcoming nearly a million and a half visitors each year.

Since opening on March 1st, the exhibit has proved to be one of the most popular ever offered at the museum, attracting hundreds of thousands of youngsters. Kids can interact with the exhibit, learn about bats and have fun doing so. They marvel that bats can swim, that there are so many different kinds of bats and that bats do not attack people or suck their blood. By the excited comments made after they have experienced the exhibit, it is obvious that children and parents alike leave with a newfound appreciation for this long misunderstood group of animals.

The natural science gallery of The Children's Museum is designed to raise the level of awareness of all visitors, especially children, to the natural world around them. Using a hands-on approach, the participatory activities provide visitors with an accurate picture of the importance of bats in the ecological chain as well as dispelling many unnecessary fears.

The "What Do You Think You Know About Bats?" board is the first activity in the exhibit. The board contains a list of 16 questions relating to the most common misconceptions about bats. Participants can answer the questions by hanging an appropriate tag on the hook next to the question. An answer board can be used to correct the work. This experience entices children and adults alike to seek additional information as many of them discover how little they know about bats!

The most popular activity allows children to "become" bats. While wearing specially designed "bat" capes, children can try to catch cloth insects. Velcro sewn in the wings of the cape enables them to discover how bats that eat insects must catch their prey.

In another game, children are encouraged to become familiar with the different "Bats of the World," presenting not only the diversity of bat species, but also the various habitats of bats and the roles they play in the ecosystem. Referring to material presented around the gameboard, photographs of different species can be placed in their habitats along with the food they eat and the country where they are found.

To teach Indiana visitors about the 12 species of bats of their own state, a giant puzzle was

created, each piece with the picture of a bat found in Indiana on the front. The place where the piece fits asks a question about the bat, with answers found in the surrounding material.

Another popular activity offers visitors an opportunity to "Build a Bat House." Two sets of pre-cut wood pieces can be assembled, with instructions, into bat houses. Hand-outs are available so that a bat house can be built at home and put up in a backyard.

Displays designed to familiarize children with the characteristics of bats include a comparison of the human arm and hand skeletal structure with that of a bat wing. Children also can solve a math problem that will tell them how many insects a bat can eat in the summertime. Another activity caters to young artists who are directed to draw a bat, place it in its home and draw the food that the bat might eat.

The exhibit has been so popular that its stay at the museum has been extended through Spring 1989.

(Bio)

Karol Bartlett is a member of BCI and the Educator/Curator of Natural Science at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis.

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*Being able to participate in the bat exhibit at The Children's Museum, rather than just look, helps visitors learn. Here, two youngsters enjoy some of the exhibit's more popular features. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE CHILDREN'S MUSEUM*

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