In 1893 the changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution were evident in every area of life as well as at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago (the World’s Fair). The fair, named for the 400th celebration of Columbus’s landing in the New World, showcased new technologies, architecture, exhibits of fine art, and curiosities and entertainments. It also offered lectures and discussions. The Exposition Company, comprising both local and national officials, provided women funding for their own building—which came to be called the Woman’s Building—for the first time ever. The fair’s Board of Lady Managers, believing in the humanitarian importance of education for young children, pressed for a Children’s Building as well. (See “Who Were the Lady Managers?”) Once informed that such a building would not be financed, the board set out to raise the funds, giving the women from each state an allotted sum to raise, based on their state’s population (Weimann 1981, 332). Even children were encouraged to raise and donate funds for the building through fund-raisers held on Columbus Day in schools across the nation.

The Children’s Building

The Children’s Building housed a working child care program, fully staffed to serve children attending the fair with their families. In conceptualizing the building’s exhibit, Bertha Palmer, president of the Board of Lady Managers, pursued twin goals of education and advocacy. The Children’s Building exhibited “the most improved methods adopted in the light of the nineteenth century for the rearing and education of children” (Elliott 1893, 162) and demonstrated to attendees the value of a successful model of caring for and educating young children (Weimann 1981).

The Board of Lady Managers hoped that this first Children’s Building would not only persuade observers to consider the importance of educating children but also “inspire thousands of philanthropic women ... to establish ... [day] nurseries where poor women obliged to labor for the support of their families may leave their little ones for safety” (Children’s Building 1893). The board, along with participating teachers, hoped that the Children’s Building display would be a catalyst for the continued development of new, appropriate methods of educating young children and for increasing the scope of social services for children.

The Children’s Building was the first exhibition of this magnitude to focus on children and their development, and it proved to be one of the most popular buildings at the fair. Designed by Alexander Sandoz of Paris, France, the building illustrated the “decorative movement in education” (“For the Little Ones” 1893, 9). The exterior displayed paintings of children from different countries, dressed in traditional national costumes, in an effort to welcome visitors from all cultures. The entrances bore quotations such as “The hope of the world is in the children,” emphasizing the potential children offered for a brighter future (Weimann 1981, 337).

The Children’s Building’s day nursery, gymnasium, and kitchen garden were three areas in which the Lady Managers showed off the latest educational methods.

Day nursery

The most popular exhibit in the Children’s Building was the nursery, comprising two rooms on the first floor (Weimann 1981). The day nursery demonstrated “the most healthful and rational method of treating the human family in the earliest stage of its development” (“For

Who Were the Lady Managers?

The Board of Lady Managers was charged with the official oversight of the Woman’s Building. The board consisted of nine women from Chicago and two female representatives from each state, territory, and the District of Columbia, as well as alternates from each state.

Bertha Palmer
Bertha Palmer (1849–1918), generally known as Mrs. Potter Palmer, was president of the Board of Lady Managers and wife of the Chicago merchant and businessman whose holdings became the Marshall Field’s department store and the grand Chicago hotel Palmer House. She worked extensively on social issues, including supporting kindergartens and distributing milk inexpensively to children living in poverty.

Emily Huntington
Emily Huntington (1841–1909) became matron of the Wilson Industrial School for Girls in New York in 1872. Distressed at the young women’s lack of skills for basic daily living, she created the kitchen garden, a system of instruction to help young children develop proficiency in the household arts. The Kitchen Garden Association, established to assist in spreading Emily Huntington’s instruction, evolved into the Industrial Education Association, which promoted practical and industrial education.
As many as 100 children of fair attendees were cared for daily by professional caregivers who were trained at the first training school for “nursery maids,” in New York City. Here, interested observers could learn the “virtue of cleanliness, appropriate regulation of temperature and ventilation, [and] moderation of nourishment” (“Fun in the Baby Building” 1893, 3). The exhibit occupied a substantial portion of the building and was divided into “bath-rooms, infant wards, rooms for larger children, dining-room, kitchen, and laundry. Partitions of glass separate the rooms occupied by the babies from the main court of the building, thus providing the crowds of visitors an opportunity to inspect the department without disturbing the children” (Children’s Building 1893).

Short lectures were offered—generally by women of the upper class who were involved in particular causes—regarding food, clothing, and sleep environments believed to be most conducive to young children’s development (“Fun in the Baby Building” 1893). The day nursery proved so successful that hundreds of mothers and children had to be turned away daily.

**Gymnasium and playground**

The gymnasium, or Department of Physical Culture, was located in the center of the building and was home to trapezes, parallel bars, vaulting horses, rings, wands, and juggling clubs (Elliott 1893). Each day, lucky children played with the equipment and materials and participated in a series of drills in marching and running and in exercises and activities on a variety of gymnastic equipment. The physical education exhibit promised to make children “strong and healthy, agile and courageous, keen, resolute … graceful and perfect physically” (Elliott 1893, 337).

In addition to the gymnasium, there was a playground on the building’s rooftop. This unique play space not only engaged the children but also suggested ways to constructively
Putting early care and education on display is not just something of the past. More than a century after the Children’s Building, Boston Children’s Museum (BCM) and other partners in Massachusetts are exhibiting kindergarten classrooms to benefit children and families as well as the larger community.

In 2010 BCM opened the Countdown to Kindergarten exhibit, which provides children who are getting ready to enter kindergarten and their families with a typical kindergarten experience. Located inside the museum, the 1,500 square foot model classroom offers children the opportunity to play with others in learning centers, such as the dramatic play and reading and writing centers. Museum educators and staff teach in the exhibit every day. They choose a theme for the day and encourage children to explore materials that may be new to them. Children can practice important skills such as sharing, taking turns, and sitting during circle time. Meeting a “teacher,” following directions, and practicing other skills, such as cutting with scissors, help support children’s transitions to school. The “teacher” provides resources to parents and caregivers and answers questions such as, “How old are children in the United States when they go to kindergarten?”, and those about school registration and developmental milestones.

The exhibit also serves as a training center for teachers. For example, Boston Public School kindergarten teachers visited the exhibit in the summer to practice teaching a new curriculum they are using this fall. More information about the exhibit, including the schedule for kindergarten-readiness nights, is available at www.bostonchildrensmuseum.org/exhibits-programs/exhibits/countdown-kindergarten.

The museum helps children and families statewide practice kindergarten learning skills. In 2012 the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care awarded the museum a Race to the Top—Early Learning Challenge grant. In response, BCM developed the Let’s Get Ready for Kindergarten! kit for its Museums/Libraries Project. Participating museums and libraries, which received the kits in the summer, are creating pop-up kindergarten classrooms.

Kit recipients can delineate space for a model classroom using simple, moveable furniture, child-size tables and chairs, and a whiteboard or flip chart that the “teacher” uses when talking with children. Included in the kit are detailed instructions and materials for teachers—museum educators or librarians, in some cases, or local volunteer kindergarten or preschool teachers—so they can facilitate learning activities. Kits provide books for teachers to read to children about going to kindergarten. Each kit includes CDs with materials to print for parents, such as tip sheets in multiple languages about kindergarten readiness and related topics, and graphics for teachers to use when making signs for the model classroom. Additionally, the kit offers videos for children and families to watch and learn more about kindergarten. Participating museums and libraries are encouraged to host kindergarten-readiness events using the pop-up classrooms to raise awareness and help families learn more about school readiness.

Some of the materials in the Let’s Get Ready for Kindergarten! kit are available online this fall. To learn more, email Fredericks@bostonchildrensmuseum.org. Video clips from the Boston Children’s Museum’s DVD Countdown to Kindergarten! are available on NAEYC’s For Families website at families.naeyc.org.

We thank Jeri Robinson, vice president of early childhood initiatives at Boston Children’s Museum, for contributing to this column.

Kitchen garden and kindergarten

The Children’s Building kitchen garden was based on the work of Emily Huntington (see “Who Were the Lady Managers?”) (Children’s Building 1893). Each day 25 young girls, dressed in child-size housekeeping outfits, learned practical household skills such as sweeping, dusting, bed making, cooking, and hygiene through the use of toys. The exhibit promised that the tasks would be taught “in so interesting and delightful a manner that what might otherwise be an irksome task to children becomes an amusing recreation” (“Little Kitchen Garden Maids” 1893, 28).

A small kindergarten was included in the Children’s Building, although not without controversy. The International Kindergarten Union had been established in 1892 for the specific purpose of organizing an exhibit at the Chicago World’s Fair, and there were already several kindergarten displays in other buildings. The goal of the kindergarten in the Children’s Building, then, became more about caring for the kindergarten-age children of attendees.
than replicating an actual kindergarten, although the class was taught by skilled teachers and contained all the appropriate equipment and materials for a model classroom. The Board of Lady Managers noted that the model class would demonstrate “the immense good that can be accomplished by [kindergarten] methods even in classes whose personnel is constantly changing” (Children’s Building 1893, 20).

**Bringing it forward**

Twenty-seven million visitors strolled through the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition and, for the first time while on fairgrounds, had the opportunity to learn about the development and education of young children. A more formal system of early childhood education was developing in the United States. This was a reflection of the desire of many philanthropic women to fund kindergartens and to help find ways to care for children whose parents worked. It also represented a general change in attitude toward children and their physical, cognitive, and social development. The 1893 Children’s Building pamphlet noted that the building provided not only a “present good [but], at the same time, by practical illustration, [an opportunity to] convince the mature visitor of the value of the methods adopted and the usefulness of the work” (7). Bertha Palmer and the other Lady Managers did indeed plant seeds in the public’s mind about the exciting possibilities that arise when adults provide appropriate space, materials, and methodology for young children’s learning. The 1893 fair thus played an important role in laying the groundwork for what became the burgeoning field of early childhood education in the twentieth century.

**References**


“For the Little Ones,” Chicago Daily Tribune, February 11, 1893.

