

# Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

WITH THE KIDS

## Imagination Station

**Life lessons are built into the fun of playtime at the annual Dream Big Festival.**

By Brenda Rees  
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EXPERTS say that children learn by playing — it's their job. If that's the case, then the annual Dream Big Festival at the Zimmer Children's Museum this Sunday can be considered a pint-sized symposium that brings out the best without motivational speakers, bad convention food and useless seminars.

Indeed, the lively end-of-the summer festival challenges kids to break their zombie attachment to video games, Internet and television to get back to the good ol' basics of pretending. Here they can dance to live music, get messy in various art workshops and even don costumes and personalities to create their own superheroes during theatrical games.

"We're all about the power of imagination," says Esther Netter, chief executive officer of the 14-year-old museum. "But we also try to teach, what we call, the 'big ideas' in each exhibit. We see ourselves in partnership with the community in raising a generation who we want to be globally aware, socially conscious and responsible citizens."

A tall order? Life lessons through mere role-playing? Don't underestimate the power of creative play, says Netter, who believes that children can be introduced to concepts of justice, equality and dignity through imaginary scenarios — of which there are oodles on the Zimmer's two floors.

Upstairs, kids can pilot a real Piper aircraft and stage their own theatrical performance complete with props, costumes and backgrounds. Downstairs on the small-scaled Main Street, tykes can serve up bagels and sushi in a cafe, compare religious traditions in a pretend synagogue, and be part of search and rescue operations as they drive an old Magen David Adom Israeli ambulance.

Elsewhere, kids of all ages can browse volumes at Bubbie's Bookstore, hold boat races on a water table and create tunes from different lands on an interactive music island. Each exhibit has an educator resource card that helps adults prompt exploration, ask questions and recognize developmental skills.

Multiculturalism abounds here with signage that's in English, Russian, Farsi, Japanese and other languages. While the museum has its roots in Jewish culture — there's even a re-creation of the Western Wall where adults and children can place their own wishes inside the wall cracks — today the museum serves a diverse community.

"Our focus is very inclusive," says Netter, who explains that the museum's once-Jewish neighborhood now has a burgeoning Korean community. To embrace a wider range of cultures and experiences, the museum moved to its current location four years ago and almost doubled its play space.

IN addition to the permanent interactive areas, the museum offers regular programs such as story times, toddler music classes and entertainment shows.

Netter points out that the museum's YouThink program — interactive art lessons for fourth- through 12th-graders offered free to public schools across the state — shows how the Zimmer wants to be a resource for local communities.

"[Creating art] is a perfect way to find out what kids think and have to say about big issues," she says, describing artwork that reflects social issues, intergenerational conflicts and world affairs. "Kids have a lot to say about what's going on around them. We need to listen to them."

### **Dream Big Festival**

**Where:** Zimmer Children's Museum, 6505 Wilshire Blvd., L.A.

**When:** 1-4 p.m. Sunday

**Cost:** \$5 adults, \$3 children 3-12, free for kids 2 and younger. Wear a costume and get in for free.

**Info:** (323) 761-8989 or [www.zimmermuseum.org](http://www.zimmermuseum.org).