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Get Busy! Visit Richard Scarry's Busytown

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Busytown™, at San Diego's Reuben H. Fleet Science Center until May 9, 2004, was inspired by Richard Scarry's children's books and is geared towards children ages 2 to 6. A no-space-wasted destination, Busytown is bursting with possibilities. Though it may feel a bit chaotic to parents upon arrival, kids jump right in. It's best to let the experience move you along, your young guide leading the way.

My son and his friends, ages 1 ½ to almost 4, had an intuitive sense of how to explore the exhibits, which are set up in five thematic areas: the Grocery Store, the Shipyard, the Power Plant, the Factory, and the Construction Area.

The first thing kids see is the Grocery Store's manually-operated conveyer belt with fruits and vegetables dropping off the end, and miniature grocery carts beckoning for a madcap shopping trip. While the younger ones are working out the usual territorial struggles over amassing the most groceries, I saw some wonderful teamwork among the older crowd.

One child loaded the conveyer belt, one cranked it forward, and another loaded groceries into the cart and ran them back around to start the process again. Items can be weighed on the scale, sorted, matched, and counted, engaging children in basic math concepts.

A favorite in our little group was the lesson in mechanical physics provided by the crane in The Shipyard. Kids manipulate the crane's hook to move cargo between the railroad and the ship. A pulley drops spongy bricks into a ship big enough for a large work crew.

According to *Busytown News*, "Every child will approach these activities in a unique way." To illustrate, the Power Plant air hoses were put to good use as hairstyling tools and microphones. Kids giggled as they inflated rubber gloves and helped Greenbug's parachute catch the wind. Pinwheels whirled. Wind chimes jingled. Balls whizzed through transparent, high-speed air chutes and popped out the top into a funnel before dropping back down. Younger children are not tall enough to see the balls emerge and land in the funnel; remember to lift the little ones so they can see the balls complete their journey.

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The Factory's four-level climbing structure is for kids on the older end of the spectrum, but younger ones can enjoy the many blocks, which fit through holes of various shapes.

Kids were hard at work creating fanciful forts and space ships in the Construction Area. Large, colorful building materials can be linked together in ways that will amaze you. Children have a satisfying experience learning about balance, gravity, stability, size, weight and shape.

In an area to the right of the main thematic displays little plumbers can install a complex network of PVC piping into a house-shaped board. The other big draw is the telephone. Kids can call each other and marvel at how sound travels through tubes.

Busytown is staged in a compact area, but be aware that there are two exits; when you first enter there appears to be only one. The fact that it is not fully contained, along with the frenetic energy of a large number of children, requires some vigilance. If you are accompanying a young "darter," I recommend a child-adult ratio of one-to-one. This will also allow you the luxury of watching your child's eyes shine with new ideas and questions about how things work.

However many children you accompany, you will leave craving a quiet nap in a cocoon. Try to plan at least two trips to Busytown (and two naps), as kids will be able to apply concepts in more depth if they return.

The exhibit is open seven days a week. For a not-as-busy time, visit between 2 to 4 p.m., Monday through Thursday. Exhibits are in English and Spanish. Don't miss the tips for parents, posted in each area. And be sure to pick up *Busytown News* on your way out, which includes a feature on "Nurturing the Natural Scientist."

One thing is certain; San Diego's Busytown has no shortage of creative and capable little scientists, already very busy in the everyday world. Hours and prices are available at www.rhfleet.org.

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