



Growing Up With Science: Reuben H. Fleet Science Center and Elementary Institute of Science Inspire Young San Diegans

by Ondine Brooks Kuraoka

Curious minds crave the chance to explore, investigate, and discover. Science doesn't have to be a mysterious realm available only to those with a knack for numbers and complicated concepts.

Children begin with a natural desire to find out more about how the world works, and why. Two of San Diego's science venues are not to be missed: the Reuben H. Fleet Science Center in Balboa Park and the Elementary Institute of Science in Southeast San Diego. Both are blazing with opportunities to ignite kids' enthusiasm for the world of science.

Reuben H. Fleet Science Center

The Science Center has been a reliable source of educational science fun since 1973, and was expanded to more than twice its original size in 1998. An exciting outing destination, the Fleet offers an array of activities for all ages.

ExploraZone Downstairs, Kid City Upstairs

Reuben H. Fleet's ExploraZone is known for its myriad hands-on exhibits, a new discovery to be made with each visit. But the latest news for parents of preschoolers is Kid City, the Fleet's new permanent exhibit tailored for children up to age 6.

Inspired by Richard Scarry's Busytown™ exhibit, Kid City visitors will find the familiar Busytown Grocery Store and Factory, and other areas of inspiration.

Math concepts have never been more fun as children gather their Grocery Store fruits and vegetables, with all the sorting, comparing, and counting that go along with "shopping." The conveyer belt is a reliable hit, with trusty shopping carts waiting nearby. Once kids discover the wild possibilities within the four levels of the Factory, they can be thoroughly immersed for the better part of an hour, working together in astounding ways.

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Though the kids couldn't care less, parents will be thrilled to know that these busy little brains are coursing with the basic concepts of physics of movement and cause and effect.

Lynne Kennedy, the Fleet's Deputy Executive Director of Education and Exhibits, says, "The displays will be changed on a regular basis so it will always be new for San Diego kids. Aside from basic scientific concepts, the children are learning how to socialize and how to share.

"I think parents are learning a tremendous amount, too. Parents can see how their kids work with other kids, how other kids do things similarly or differently, and that it's all OK, no matter which way they do it. We try to encourage parents to set the curiosity level of their kids in gear so that they're thinking about how the world around them works."

Other Kid City areas include Young Explorer Computers, equipped with five educational games, and a funhouse mirror, sure to give everyone the giggles. A jumbo set of interlocking blocks inspires marvelous creations in the Block Corner, and the Magnetic Wall has extra large letters and numbers for little hands. The Book Nook is a perfect spot to rest for a few minutes and recharge with a cozy story.

The scope of Kid City is small compared with Busytown, but is thus easier to digest for the little ones, allowing for a more focused experience. Parents need to be aware that there are two exits to the second floor room, due to fire safety requirements. Two attendants usually help monitor the Kid City exhibit hall.

Family Science Days

The Fleet Science Center offers several other stimulating and educational activities for kids. *Family Science Days* take place from 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. on the third Saturday of the month, and feature science activities designed to enhance the ExploraZone experience. Family Science experiments, which may be taken home, are included in the price of Science Center admission.

Planetarium Show for Preschoolers

"Night On Dream Mountain," a planetarium show specifically created for children ages 4 to 6, is a beautiful and exciting feast for little eyes and ears. Often enjoyed by younger children as well, this program is a fantastic way to address curiosity about the changing evening sky, and sure to whet appetites for more information. Shows start Saturdays at 10 a.m.

Backyard Astronomers

"The Sky Tonight Planetarium Show," the first Wednesday of each month at 7 p.m., is ideal for illuminating the basics of astronomy for clear nights in your own back yard. Immediately following the show, the San Diego Astronomy Association offers free telescope viewing on the lawn outside the Science Center, weather permitting. The telescope viewing does not require planetarium show tickets.

Girl Scout Science Badge Workshops

Girl Scout Science Badge workshops are offered on weekends at noon. The workshops must be reserved at least one month in advance. Call 619-238-1233, extension 802 for more information.

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Mission to the Moon

The Fleet Science Center is also the proud home of the Nierman Challenger Learning Center. Kids in grades five to 12 can be an astronaut for a day in a realistic “mission” to the moon or Mars in a mock-up 21st century space station, and enjoy the challenges of space travel, with its necessary teamwork, complex technology and, of course, its inherent excitement and drama. The next mission available to the public is a moon mission, on Saturday, February 19. More information, including fees, can be found online at www.rhfleet.org under Education; scroll down to Public Missions.

Elementary Institute of Science

While the Fleet Science Center offers educational entertainment of the highest quality, kids ages 7 to 13 with a strong interest in science can take it to the next level at the Elementary Institute of Science (EIS). A not-for-profit organization celebrating its 40th year in San Diego, the institute is one of San Diego’s premier educational resources.

Nine Science Labs

Located in southeast San Diego, the new, year-old campus is stunning, with rounded edges, aglow with natural light streaming in from floor-to-ceiling windows. Whimsical floor murals and two 500-gallon aquariums – saltwater and freshwater – create a stimulating, playful environment for the young scientists fortunate enough to participate in the Institute’s many programs.

Complete with nine science labs, a science library, an outdoor amphitheater, a student garden, hummingbird and butterfly habitats, and a playfield, EIS is a wondrous and comfortable place to learn.

After-school, Saturday and Summer Programs

The mission of EIS is “to nurture the intellectual curiosity of San Diego’s children by providing ‘hands-on’ experiences to stimulate an on-going appreciation and understanding of science and technology.” After-school, Saturday and summer programs are available in the subjects of astronomy, biology, chemistry, computer science, engineering, geology, health, natural science and photography.

Instructed by local university students majoring in the subjects they teach, classes include laboratory work, slide presentations and field trips, as well as guest speakers from San Diego’s scientific and educational facilities. There are no more than 10 students in each class at EIS, to ensure a satisfying experience, with time for individual attention for each student.

State-of-the-Art Facility

Doris Anderson, Executive Director of EIS, says, “All kids learn differently. We don’t use textbooks or quizzes but our curriculum does support what’s going on in the classroom.

“Schools often don’t have the time to provide much of the hands-on part of the science experience. We have a state-of-the-art facility. Students gather around and do their experiments on a science table. We also have our own photography studio with a dark room.”

EIS is now enrolling second generations of students, something exciting and moving for Anderson. A number of first generation students have gone on to careers in the sciences, engineering and technology.

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Expect Great Things

With the phenomenal stomping grounds provided by the Elementary Institute of Science and the Reuben H. Fleet Science Center, San Diego may be hometown to discoverers of the century's newest scientific realms.

For More Information

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