

Interpretation Australia Award for Excellence - 2018 Keeper Kids, Melbourne Zoo



1. What is your project?

Keeper Kids is an, interactive play-based learning experience that invites children and their families to imagine what it is like to work at the Zoo. It takes real-life practices and procedures and translates them into learning experiences for young children through their own language, play! Roles of the keepers, veterinarians, horticulturalists, works staff and researchers are brought to life through play to build a stronger connection with the Zoo and help build an audience for life.

Want to be a Zoo-keeper for the day? Feed and care for the animals? Sure thing! Let's get you a keeper's uniform and the rest is up to you! Love animals and want to help care for them? Why not try your hand at being a Keeper Kids Vet? Examine real x-rays to see what each patient might need before listening to their heartbeats through specialised stethoscopes. It's all here waiting for you! This part of the Zoo is just for you, you're in charge and where the animals live and what they do is completely up to you!

2. How does it demonstrate excellence and best practice in heritage interpretation?

Planning

This project showcases excellence in interpretation. It makes our youngest visitors the heroes of their own journey, to play, experiment and learn. It takes real objects and procedures like x-rays of actual animals and food preparation and encourages kids to explore, investigate and care for wildlife. It hasn't been dumbed-down or cutesied up, this is the real deal, real work of real staff at the Zoo. It uses authentic objects, real case studies of animals within our collection, chosen for their uniqueness, relatability, conservation significance and learning opportunities. It gets kids face to face with some of our most threatened species and encourages them to explore through play. It really is the whole Zoo shrunk down into one very cool, very fun building!

Keeper Kids shares our passionate people with our youngest audience. You come face to face with the real heroes that make the Zoo tick, and find out why they love what they do. You can be a vet, a keeper, a researcher, a member of our works team or even the director of the zoo!

Research, concept planning and methodology – identifying the need

Evaluation of the experience of our Zoo visitors identified that while the Zoo was popular among families with young children, these families reported a lack of interactive experiences for their children at the Zoo. Keeper Kids aimed to bridge this gap through play-based experiences, providing a strategically important offering in improving the zoo as a family destination. We were also wanting to develop experiences that would enable us to convert one-time visitors to take up membership packages and become return visitors. Our membership program is integral to the Zoos vision of turning Victorians into advocate for the conservation of local species. Membership packages enable us to have long-term conversations with members.

We knew that from birth to eight was a critical period in a child's life. It is when foundations of learning and development are established and when brain development is at optimal level. The Victorian Early Learning Development Framework covers the importance of this period and this was used as a key reference point in creating the experience. Just over half of all Zoo visits were adults with children, the second largest segment was pre-school aged children. Creating a unique experience targeted directly at this audience segment was not only needed but an essential element in creating life-long learners.

Intention and theme

Our key intention in delivering this space was to use a child-centric approach that would build and foster strong emotional connections between visitors and the Zoo in a fun and engaging way. We wanted to bring the roles of our staff to life, to give an inside view into the Zoo, showcasing the passionate people behind the scenes and the work they do. To reveal some of our inner workings and secrets, after all the Zoo is a magical place for most kids – what happens behind the scenes is a whole other world! Most importantly it needed to bring the fun. We wanted it to be based in reality with plenty of scope for children's imaginations to explore and run wild. The space was based around the core idea of *"roles of the keepers, veterinarians, horticulturalists and zoo staff are brought to life through play to build a stronger connection with the Zoo."*

Development of the experience

This project really was a team effort and cumulative effort of many skill sets. We worked with Early Learning consultants, our own Zoo educators and Interpreters as well as play specialists to ensure that our ideas were transferrable, meaningful and engaging. But most importantly we wanted the space to be fun, because, let's face it, without the fun, everything else was irrelevant! Early Childhood expert Sue Elliott was also engaged to conduct training for staff to ensure the face to face experience were aligned with the same philosophy that the space was built upon.

Communication

Through the use of props, real objects, costumes and animal exhibits we set the scene for kids to explore and investigate their own stories. This hands-on approach was supported by patient charts and work tasks that could be read out-loud by parents, encouraging family groups to play and interact together. We wanted a highly flexible setting with lots of fun elements to really encourage kids to be adventurous and bold in their approach. Keeper Kids provides a platform for open-ended play, aligned with best-practice early childhood pedagogy. This is a space where there are no rules, no right or wrong, it really is a 'choose your own adventure' style space!

Design and spatial considerations

Keeper Kids is located in an existing building. At first thought, this sounded like an easy win, however the building was originally built in the 1920's as a tea room, later being developed into office accommodation. The building itself was circular in design, with quite a few nooks and crannies, pokey small dark spaces. So we set to work with an architect and a sledge hammer, removing several internal walls and opening the space up entirely. There is one discrete entry/exit, so parents can let their kids play throughout the space and still remain within eyesight.

This provided an added challenge as the space was occupied by the Zoo's Education Team, so before works could commence, this team needed to be relocated, and new office spaces created for them.

The graphic look and feel of the space is bright, airy and fun. Each section has its own colour theme, the works department is orange, the hi-vis vests are orange, and most of the props are orange. In contrast, the horticulture section is green, green vest, green tools etc. This enables packing up when you've finished playing to be more straight-forward for kids as all the green things go in the green section etc.

Engagement

The essence of Keeper Kids is to provide hands-on, play-based, engaging experiences that facilitate learning through doing. Emphasis is placed on acting out the activities of Zoo staff through dressing up and role playing. Toys, tools, costumes, plush animals, and other props are used throughout the space. Touchscreens, and complex multimedia are deliberately absent. This space is about

imagination, fun, play and creativity. Connection with real objects and stories is paramount. Real x-rays of patients that our vets have treated are found in the vet section. Sure they get damaged from time to time, but these are easily reprinted and replaced.

The use of costumes, which are all on themed racks in the centre of the building, really transforms kids into the roles they are playing, becoming Zoo staff in the blink of an eye. The costumes really bring the fun, it's amazing what you put on a stethoscope, hi-vis vest or medical outfit! Play is so much more fun when you get to be a REAL vet!

Within the space we have specialised Early Learning staff that run additional activities like craft times and reading times. They also do serendipitous engagement with kids, bringing the space to life and value-adding to the overall experience.

Implementation

Keeper Kids has been a multi-stage project. Each was established with a project brief and clearly articulated outcomes, target audience, interpretive approach and alignment with organisational priorities. We worked with early learning consultants to ensure our content and the level we were designing for were well suited. Our original concept was to deliver the core experience of Vets, Keepers, Researchers and Horticulture. The space contained two invertebrate exhibits and one primate exhibit, all of these animals display well, are-active, visible and great for kids to get up-close too.

Since opening and undertaking fairly thorough evaluation (detailed below) we have made several changes to the experience and the day to day running of the space.

We amended the main internal exhibit to be suitable for Bolivian Squirrel Monkeys, removing the smaller invertebrate exhibits. We later refurbished the Keeper area so that it had a greater focus on animal enrichment and welfare, not just dietary tasks. We've also added a Keeper Kitchen, where keepers can prepare food for the animals and undertake husbandry tasks. One full 'wall' of the kitchen is floor to ceiling glass so that everything is on display. We also added a dedicated researcher section to the outside courtyard, which has showcases our conservation programs.

We also added a Works Department, where kids get to design, plan and build transport crates for animals, plumb together pipes to deliver recycled water to the lion exhibit (complete with giant plush lion) and focus on safety with hi-vis vests, goggles, hard hats and signage with flashing lights.

Keeper Kids has had several stages of development as we have tinkered and tailored the experience to better improve the overall story of the Zoo and how it is portrayed. Our original research showed that our youngest visitors thought that the animal keepers were the most important people in the Zoo. While our keepers are incredibly dedicated and passionate, there is also several other teams of people that keep the zoo running and that are passionate about what they do.

In terms of operating with other facets of the business, Keeper Kids provided an invaluable experience to our Zoo members. This is an ever-growing segment of our visitation strategy; Keeper Kids provides an all-weather experience that has encouraged repeat visitation year-round. The continual development of the space, adding of new elements and staging of events by specialised staff hits the sweet spot for members. This space gives members the unique experiences that they seek, enabling them to talk to Zoo staff members and get inside knowledge of the Zoo and its workings. The high-level of value-adding through spaces like Keeper Kids converts visitors to members as there is always a reason to visit.

Access

Catering for diverse audiences

The very nature of Keeper Kids is based around the concept of free play. Kids are curious, experienced, self-aware and capable. This space provides the opportunity for them to construct their own meaning and make their own discoveries, they are the heroes of their own journey. This framework allows for inclusive experiences for all visitors, regardless of ability, language and cultural background.

Strategies for improving visitor access

With the addition of paid staff into the Keeper Kids space we've been able to undertake comprehensive evaluation of both the experience itself and also the infrastructure and amenities provided. This feedback has been invaluable in enabling us to continually improve the experience for both kids and their families.

We had initially refurbished the toilet facilities within this building to be more suited to kids and careers, our evaluation highlighted that we needed a more dedicated space for breastfeeding mums. With this feedback on board, we converted a previously under-utilised storage space into a parent's room; complete with comfy lounge chairs for mums, microwaves, more robust change tables and other creature comforts. This change has resulted in parents spending longer in the Keeper Kids space, no longer leaving the space to go to the parents' room and not returning.

The space is also suitable for wheelchairs and other mobility aids as it is single storey with wide open-spaces. There is some seating available around the central tree zone, with conservation-themed cushions and low-level seating for other family members.

Training and staffing

Our original intention was that the success of the space would rely on high quality interactions between kids and staff. We'd utilise staff and volunteers within the space to value add to kid's experiences. The staff would also do general tidying, maintenance and re-ordering of props, costumes and interpretive media.

Getting the right fit for staffing in the space required an adaptive management approach. Our initial thought was that the nature of the space was very interpretive and so our interpreters would be best suited to the space. At the time, the skillset of that team focussed heavily on presentation skills to large audiences of several hundred. While these staff *could* work in the space it wasn't necessarily where they felt they could contribute the most to the business. We also placed specifically recruited volunteers in the space, which were great, but we required more than what they were able to offer.

After some broader, lateral thinking, we recruited specialised early learning educators that were able to deliver both learning and interpretive outcomes combined. These staff are definitely the best fit for the space, designing, planning and implementing quality bonus-add programs that reflect the conservation commitment of the broader Zoo. These staff also run daily activities, enabling them to tailor experiences depending on the audience, with a stronger representation of preschool children on weekdays.

3. Identify the resources needed for your projects (e.g. staff, materials, money). Demonstrate how you used these resources effectively.

The project costs for Keeper Kids have been spread across a couple of years as we've really fine-tuned the experience.

Build and development of space

Stage One (3 projects)	\$455,308
Building reconfiguration	\$167,877
Keeper Kids experience design and fit out	\$287,431
• Design \$19,323	
• Interpretive Fabrication \$199,2756	
• Animal exhibit \$25,266	
• Props and furniture \$43,566	
Stage 2 - Works area	\$75,504
Design fees	\$13,051
Building and construction works, and fit-out	\$20,670
Interpretive works	\$41,783
Stage 3 – Outdoor Research	\$159,884
Design fees	\$19,550
Building works	\$15,349
Landscape works	\$83,185
Interpretive works	\$41,800

Average yearly budget

Item	Budgeted amount
Replacement props, plush toys, costumes etc.	\$6,000
Staffing costs	\$96,000
Activities and materials	\$2,000

*large scale event activations are covered through separate budgets.

As part of Melbourne Zoos commitment to sustainability, we investigate the usage of environmentally friendly and impact-reducing materials where possible. Within this space we have upcycled several items in the Zoos collection in a bid to be more environmentally responsible. We also chose items that were touch, hard-wearing and would be suitable for kids to play with long-term, we avoided flimsy, plastic items.

4. How has your project met clear and measurable outcomes for your client/organisation and stakeholders?

This project has been a massive success for Melbourne Zoo. We've tracked its reception through several processes; written visitor feedback (from both letters and social media), heat-mapping and evaluation surveys. These have all given us invaluable insights and suggestions to continually improve the experience.

Visitor evaluations

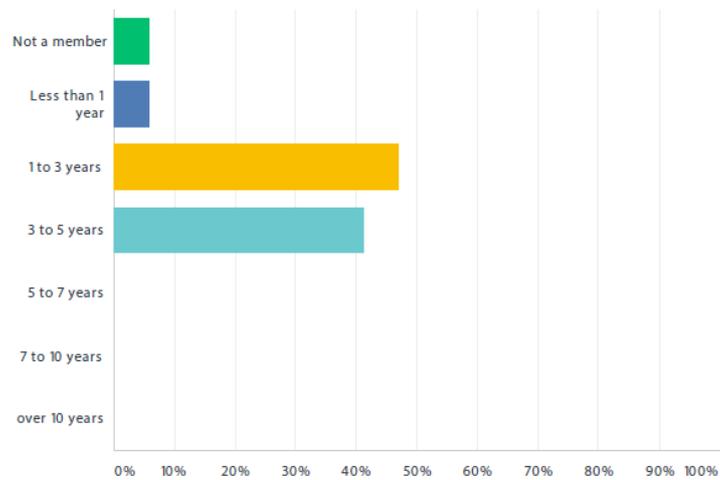
We essentially have two significant user groups in Keeper Kids, the kids themselves and their parents/carers. We feel that the voices of both groups should be heard equally, so our Early Learning specialists have developed two evaluation processes for kids. The first is for the younger kids and simply asks them to put an icypole stick in the box that best fits their experience. It uses the familiar lexicon of emoji faces with simple text. The second is a survey for slightly older kids, it uses similar emojis but also includes space for kids to write comments underneath. The staff then collate these responses and track them in the context of further development and delivery of spaces and programs.



We also undertook more comprehensive evaluation of the parents experience of the space to better understand what our visitors looked like and what they were wanting from the space. Due to the nature of the space encouraging 'dwell' time while kids are playing, there's great opportunity to get meaningful data from parents and carers.

The parent/carer surveys gave us really valuable insights. One of our key intentions in developing this space was to provide an all-weather experience that would value-add to the benefits of our membership program. The first question we asked parents and carers was around membership, which showed that less than 10% of Keeper Kids visitors were members, with a large segment being members for between 1-5 years. This was really significant as one of our Corporate goals has not only been to increase our membership base but to also work on products aimed at long-term member retention.

How long have you been a Zoos Victoria member?

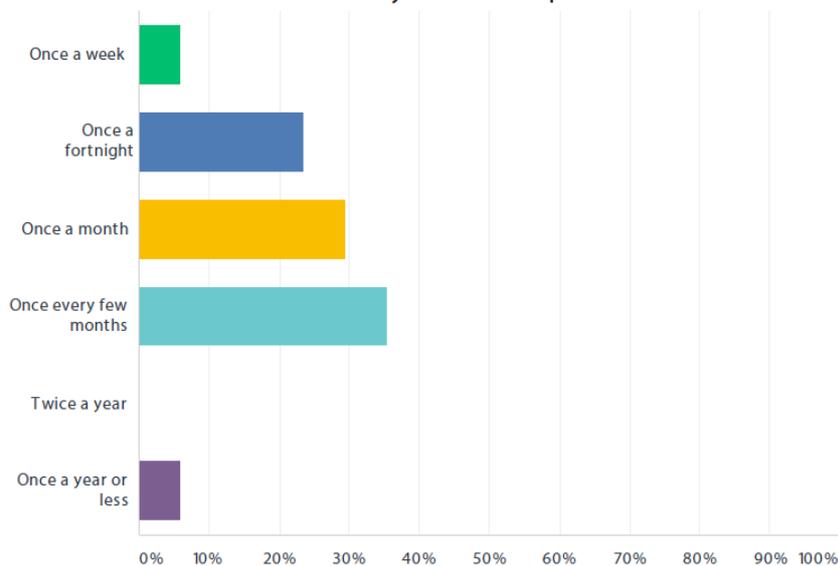


So we now knew that Keeper Kids attracted members, but was it strong enough to act as a catalyst for repeat visitation? We then asked about how often members visited Keeper Kids to ascertain if the space was engaging enough to sustain repeat visitation.

The following graph highlights that members are most likely to visit Keeper Kids once, or more than once a month. It's fair to assume that those visitors that selected 'once a year or less' would not be our membership base as they are more likely to visit the Zoo once a year.

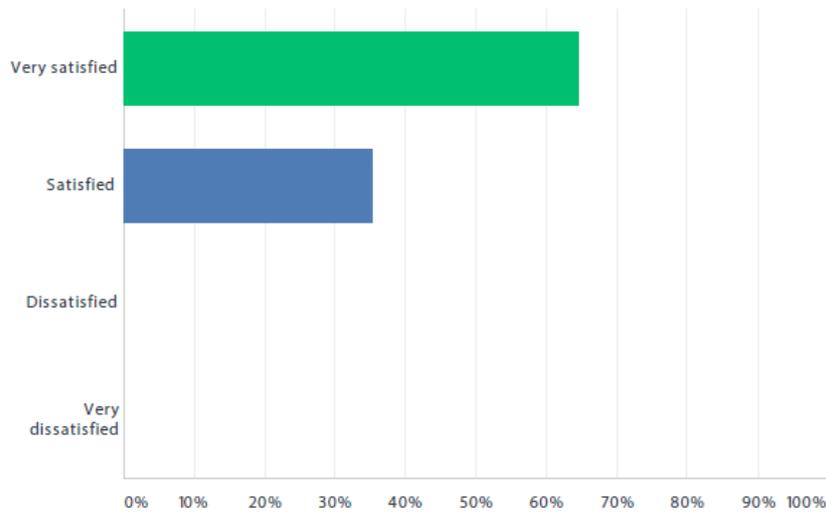
Between both of these questions we can ascertain that Keeper Kids adds value to our membership package and is a likely catalyst for membership retention. This highlights both its financial and experiential value to the broader suite of Zoo experiences.

How often do you visit Keeper Kids?



While both of these questions suggested that visitors were generally satisfied with Keeper Kids, we felt it was important to also consider their overall satisfaction with the general experience. The rate of experiential satisfaction was quite high and reinforced what we'd seen in the previous two questions.

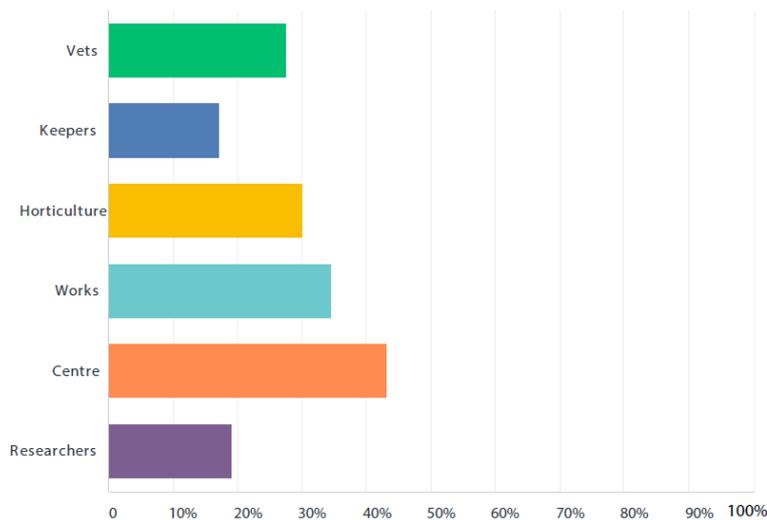
How would you rate your overall Keeper Kids experience?



Satisfied that the general experience was well received among members and visitors, we wanted to take a deep dive into individual component of the experience. Where were visitors spending their time, was there some areas that were being under-utilised or needed further development? To understand this, we undertook heat mapping, where staff observed and recorded the amount of time spent in each area. This gave us the following graph, which shows that the centre space (where the costumes, plush and parent/carer sitting area are located) was the most frequented space, closely followed by the works, horticulture and vets spaces. Reading in to the accompanying observations, we see that kids and their parents often engage in the space together, hence the high rating of the centre space. This also suggests that the costumes and plush toys are one of the highlights of playing in the space, no huge surprises there, we knew costumes were a popular component of mirror-based play.

It is worth noting that since we have undertaken this heat-mapping, we have done more work on the keeper area. We have built large-scale bird aviaries outside Keeper Kids that will house four of our Macaws, which are being trained to free-fly through the space. This will add another element of awe to the experience as visitors will be able to see the Macaws being trained and flying through the space twice a day. It will also add further value to the suite of experience for members.

Where do children spend their time?



Written feedback

Keeper Kids has been a great success story for Melbourne Zoo. We see many return visitors through the space that get to know our staff and establish ongoing relationships and connections with them. We recently had a member family write to our Directors office to acknowledge Rachel, one of the Keeper Kids staff members. Frequent visitors to Keeper Kids, their daughter had named all of the plush toys and says hello to every one of them every visit. The staff were in the process of upgrading some of the much loved plush with new plush and the little girls favourite Orang-utan, George had gone missing. She was heartbroken, Rachel dug George out from the discarded pile and gave him to the little girl for safe keeping from here on in. Her mother was really appreciative of Rachel's efforts, they visit Keeper Kids every time they are at the Zoo.

We've also been featured in several local, high-profile blogs:

<https://tothotornot.com/melbourne-zoo-keeper-kids/>

<https://www.mammaknowsnorth.com.au/family-experiences/keeper-kids-melbourne-zoo>

<https://meetoo.com.au/keeper-kids-at-melbourne-zoo/>

And we have received several positive comments and recommendations on TripAdvisor, like this one:



AnnaDBJ
Melbourne,
Australia

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Reviewed 10 April 2012

Check out the new Keeper Kids play area!

A wonderful zoo experience for adults and kids - a lot of attention and care given to the design of the animal environments, and beautiful gardens and landscaping for visitors. I visit fairly often (once/month) with my two small kids, and our favourite walk is the elephant trail (elephants, tigers and orangutans the highlights - the baby elephants are getting bigger but still small and playful!). The new baboon enclosure is excellent, and my younger son loves the reptile house - the crocodiles are his very favourite animals! If you have children, we highly recommend the new Keeper Kids play area - your child can pretend to be a Zoo Keeper or Vet, prepare special animal food, fix up sick or injured animals and play with LOTS of soft toys. A lovely day out!

Future plans and things to improve on

Keeper Kids is not only the delivery of an amazing idea and vision, it represents what can be achieved when we are able to critically evaluate our work, acknowledge its weaknesses and be given the space to develop solutions. In the first iteration of the researcher space, we thought that looking for eye shine of animals in a canvas tent that simulated the night sky would be a really cool activity. It's what our researchers do in the field, so the authenticity of the experience was there. While it rated as a fun thing to do, it failed to have the holding power of the other spaces in Keeper kids. It didn't inspire kids to play and be imaginative with this space.

So we went back to the drawing board and looked for a better solution to portray the work our researchers do in the field. We consulted with them and looked at other elements of the field work they undertake to see what would be translatable to kids. This is where we identified really focussing on our priority threatened species, and moving the activity outdoors, into 'the field.' Looking for Southern Corroboree Frogs like our scientists do in the field, looking for Helmeted Honeyeaters and their leg bands. These activities offered high levels of fun and engagement, while also maintaining scientific integrity. These ideas translated into the dedicated Researcher space, an enclosed courtyard alongside Keeper Kids that is accessed through Keeper Kids, maintaining a safe one way in, one way out approach for the entire space. This space gets a decent amount of use, and is the focus of our Kindergarten programs. It is an outside space, so its usage tends to reflect the weather conditions!

If there is one thing that both the Keeper Kid evaluation and the broader Zoo evaluation shows us it's that members are continually looking for new or improved experiences. While we maintain the core

experience of Keeper Kids, we also add to this space for special events, activations and upcoming campaigns, really bringing the space to life. At the time of writing, we're about to deliver our newest photographic exhibition, *National Geographic 50 Greatest Wildlife Photographs*. We have a special installation planned for Keeper Kids, where kids will be able to take on the role of wildlife photographer and snap their favourite animal.

We wanted to build a space that fostered connections between kids and the Zoo, showcasing the care we provide by giving them a chance to experience it themselves, while at the same time, developing life-long relationships of learning, respect, wonder and awe. The commitment and ongoing development of this space illustrates the level of dedication and commitment we have to ensuring we achieve this. Since first developing this space and then watching its success, we have now extended the concept to both Werribee Zoo (Ranger Kids) and Healesville Sanctuary (Future Vets) where it's proving to engage even the youngest of our visitors into the magical world of who's who in the Zoo!