

# kid size

The material world of childhood



**Kid size**  
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The exhibition has been curated by independent curator and writer Lucy Bullivant, London and Jutta Oldiges, Vitra Design Museum.

The current curator of the exhibition is Dr. Barbara Fehlbaum, Basel, Switzerland

This exhibition aims to explore and critically illuminate the changing relationships between children and adults as expressed by their immediate, everyday material environments in societies in and beyond the Western world.

Cross-cultural patterns of adult provision for children are traced through a geographically far-reaching selection of furniture and other daily artefacts. Contextual images showing activities and objects in use, and a video about children's play with footage from the 1920s to the present day, are woven into the layout. These offer glimpses of the material world of childhood that build up a wider, global perspective of the developing child's response to its environment and its closest relationships.

From a Biedermeier nursery to work-orientated Shaker communities in New England, a latmul house in Papua New Guinea to the collective space of a Chinese kindergarten, the material worlds of childhood are made up of furniture and artefacts that are potent carriers of meaning. Irrespective of culture or period, and conspicuous by their presence (or relative absence), they communicate messages about adult attitudes towards learning, the child's physical and psychological development, intimacy and order in the family, control, autonomy and personal territory, and above all the role of play. The child's own improvised intervention in the adult world encourages us to consider the meaning of play, and above all, the play between the two worlds of adult and child.

## **The exhibition**

The exhibits are grouped into five themes defined by contrasting functions, featuring typologies that illuminate patterns of sleeping, basic functions, mobility, play forms, institutions of formal and informal learning. The selection of exhibits cuts a broad swathe through many cultures and periods in order to illuminate links between them.

## **Patterns of sleeping**

Contrasts in patterns of infant and child care mark out specific cultures, periods and stages in the child's development, and nothing is more central to perceiving this than the place of sleep. Whether elaborate or simple, fixed or mobile, through its design, materials, symbolism and methods of manufacture we can unravel adult attitudes towards the child's social context and family aspirations. Only in the Western world, for example, are children expected to sleep alone. Cots, cradles, hammocks, mats and cradleboards embody themes of intimacy and distance, security, mobility, adaptability and multi-purpose use as play objects.

## **Basic functions**

The "invention" of the nursery in the seventeenth century, and of furniture designed specifically for it, brought highchairs and a proliferation of other designs relating to the daily care of children - supporting feeding, toilet training, bathing, grooming, nappy changing and storage. As children began to be seen to have rights alongside adults, furniture for their daily care gradually broadened from being miniaturised versions of adult furniture, developing in adaptability while maintaining scope to control. Enabling participation in the adult world, which baby care designs can curtail by estrangement, starts at birth. The vast inventory of childcare products of the industrialised nations, which can turn homes into hospital wards, is not prevalent in non-Western cultures like the latmul of Papua New Guinea, where the encouragement of personal initiative, through food gathering and preparation, and autonomous activities, are traditional features of everyday life.

## **Play**

Children the world over play as a matter of necessity, stimulating their imagination and shaping their psychic identity. Without the tangible, commercial objects of play, they draw on their own resources, using indigenous raw materials and found objects from the external environment. In industrialised cultures, arrays of play furniture are provided within interior settings often geared to adult use. Their hybrid nature erases the boundaries between practicality and play, between furniture and toy, and ideally encourages spontaneity of use. Assemblages, or rocking or constructional forms, which sometimes double up as practical items such as highchairs or cots, assist motor skills, logic, role-play, eye-hand co-ordination and creativity. Improvisational play, with its lack of reliance on a pre-defined programme, reinvents the adult order.

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Basic functions / patterns of sleeping



Patterns of sleeping / basic functions



Basic functions / learning

# kid size



Formal learning



Mobility



Play

**Mobility**

The pram, the sling and buggy, like the idiosyncratic forms of the baby walker known since medieval times, are all vehicles facilitating the mobility of the child with their own history and culture. The classic coach-built pram, well-upholstered and elegantly gleaming, often bought as a family investment, has been overtaken by the lightness and convenience of carrycots and transporters which separate and fold down for storage and for travelling, and also by the slings and baby carriers originating in many non-Western cultures where the younger child is kept physically close to its mobile parents. The sling attunes children to rhythms of the adult world; the pram positioned them at arm's length from their carers: in the Western world, both are social statements.

**Formal learning**

The kindergarten or day nursery might best be described as an extension of the home, not a substitute for it. This context for the child's first social relationships outside the home has produced various communally used designs. Desks for formal learning are not universal; nor are schoolrooms. In fact, a long period of compulsory schooling is a recent Western invention. In previous centuries not all children went to school, nor do they now in some cultures. The organisation of space for learning, whether at school or in the home, reflects widely varying definitions of "education". Conforming patterns of provision have been increasingly broken by the initiatives of designers keen to explore design solutions supporting learning that is informal, personal and, as a result, usually fun.

**Concept and Curator**

Lucy Bullivant, London (independent curator), Jutta Oldiges, Vitra Design Museum;  
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**Exhibition Design**

Dieter Thiel

**Exhibits**

approximately 140 objects  
6 large format prints ( 382cm x 256cm)  
Photos (in frames)  
7 frames with didactic material (122cm x 92cm)  
4 frames with didactic material (62cm x 92cm)  
1 video documentation, to be played on 6 stations

**Space requirement**

600 – 800 sqm

**Shipping volume**

three 40 ft containers

**Min. ceiling height**

3.0 m

**Catalogue**

Editors: Alexander von Vegesack, Jutta Oldiges and Lucy Bullivant.

**Size**

320 pages, 24 x 28 cm, German and English version

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