

Saturday's Child

CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS • FAMILY ACTIVITIES

A Fruitful Discovery in Shenandoah Valley

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AT THE Apple Packing Shed in Old Town Winchester, workers typically bustle about, gathering, weighing and sorting the shiny fruits, then piling them into market crates. Bees—large ones—hover nearby, wriggling and giggling inside a huge honeycomb's hexagonal yellow cells.

Giant, giggling bees? They're not uncommon at the Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum, a hands-on learning center along the town's pedestrian mall. Packed with activities aimed at toddlers through middle-schoolers, the small museum is just five miles from local apple orchards. It's an entertaining side outing for families who have trekked out to rural Frederick County, Va., to pick fruit and enjoy fall foliage. When young visitors aren't loading apple containers or trying on bee costumes, they may be building a chair out of PVC pipe pieces, pounding on a Native American drum, racing golf balls down miniature ski slopes or literally climbing the walls.

Arriving at the museum after an hour of apple picking on a recent Sunday, my 2½-year-old niece, Julianna, and fourth-grade daughter, Anna, naturally gravitated toward the Apple Packing Shed, designed to show kids how simple machines function. While Anna figured out how to transport a crate via an inclined plane, her little cousin dropped plastic apples into a bucket. Displaying minimal instructions, the exhibit lets children, sometimes with adults' help, discover how to use simple machines like a pulley or wheel and axle, all the while pretending to prepare apples for sale.



Children can wear costumes and learn about motion principles at the Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum in Winchester, Va.

"I think it's probably our most successful exhibit," says Jan Kirby, director of education. Often, children who don't know each other join forces to set up an apple-packing assembly line, not unlike those at Winchester apple

companies.

"They seem very engrossed by the community aspect of it," Kirby says of the children, who put a lot of energy into completing their cooperative tasks. "We call it the Apple Packing Shed Frenzy!"

Tiring of apples, Anna and Julianna made a beeline to the natural history area, where they looked at a real live turtle, then climbed into the kid-size honeycomb for a photo op. Inside an adjacent discovery cottage, the cousins fearlessly climbed a ladder to reach a loft hideaway, a spot where some kids escape with nature books plucked from the shelves below. Beneath the bookcase, drawers contain a variety of activities and props for such topics as owl pellets, chipmunks and insect senses.

The museum offers a variety of activities in nearly a dozen themed areas, all within easy eye-shot of parents who fall behind. Our family especially enjoyed Raceways, the newest permanent exhibit, which features five interactive displays that demonstrate such scientific motion principles as momentum and acceleration. Anna and Julianna had fun racing golf balls on the Ski Jump and trying to land balls into buckets at the end of the Loop-the-Loop.

While many exhibits attract younger children, some, like the ambulance and emergency center, also appeal to middle-schoolers, who act out scenes using props.

"We get a lot of 'ER' maniacs in here," with preteens hollering "Clear!" as they attempt to revive "patients," Kirby says. The set-up includes a gurney, wheelchair, crutches, X-rays and uniforms.

Another area popular with older children, the climbing wall features oodles of oddly shaped handholds and footholds, positioned to encourage kids to climb horizontally rather than vertically. Anna didn't get too far before losing her footing. Fortunately, layers of rubber bits cushion the floor around the climbing area.

Other museum highlights in-

clude a Native American display, complete with an authentic-looking long house (an Iroquois dwelling); and an assortment of puzzles and building activities. In the Take-Apart Room, youngsters can disassemble old circuit boards and sift through boxes with labels like "Flat Round Things" and "Cool Big Plastic Things."

Our family's visit coincided with the museum's monthly Visiting Artist Series. Under the guidance of guest artist Erin Ferrell, families used wire, tissue paper, beads, foil and other supplies to create wire sculptures like butterflies and dream catchers. Anna crafted giant, circa 1972 tissue-paper flowers.

"The fun thing about this program is that the parents participate as much as the children," Ferrell says, citing a recent art day when one youngster quickly lost interest in his project and ventured off to explore the museum. The boy's father stayed behind, however, playing with glitter, paper and beads for three hours.

SHENANDOAH VALLEY DISCOVERY MUSEUM — 54 S. Loudoun St., Winchester, Va., on the pedestrian mall across from a metered parking lot. Winchester, Va. 540/722-2020. Web site: www.discoverymuseum.net. Open Monday through Saturday 9 to 5, Sundays 1 to 5. Admission is \$4, \$3 per person for groups of 10 or more (advance registration required). On "Thank Goodness It's First Friday," visit the museum and enjoy special events free of charge from 5 to 7:30 p.m. On Oct. 5, an outdoor movie night features Disney's "Tchotch and Mr. Toad." Bring lawn chairs or blankets to the parking lot across from the museum. On Nov. 2, bagpiper Charles Fowler performs and explains how his instrument works. The second weekend of each month features the Visiting Artist Series, a free hands-on family art program led by professional artists. On Oct. 13 and 14, Megan Caldwell helps visitors create mosaics from natural materials. Erin Ferrell shows how to make paper jewelry on Nov. 10 and 11. Programs take place on the second Saturday from 10 to 3 and on the second Sunday from 1 to 4.

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