5 lessons for kids at the Please Touch Museum’s new money exhibit

By Grace Dickinson
STAFF WRITER

When’s the best age to teach your kids about money? Start ‘em young, advise the folks at the Please Touch Museum, which debuts Cents & Sensibility on Saturday, Jan. 12. The display is the museum’s first addition to its permanent collection since it moved to Fairmount Park’s Memorial Hall in 2008.

“Money is often very obscure for young children,” says Patricia Wellenbach, CEO of the Please Touch Museum. “Many adults struggle with how to talk to children about money, what it means to save, how to make decisions on where and on what to spend.”

Designed for children ages 3 to 7, the 750-square-foot interactive display — included with general admission — has activities and features that help illustrate financial concepts such as income, savings, and investments. It poses questions like “What things are part of your family’s budget?” to start conversations between parents and kids.

“What we’re trying to do is teach children that money isn’t something to be afraid of. It’s something that can help you on a personal level and also help you benefit the world,” Wellenbach says. “This opens up the topic.”

For those planning a visit, here are the five key takeaways you can look forward to learning as a family.

1. What’s in a dollar?
In an increasingly cashless world, it’s still worth understanding that money breaks down into dollars and cents. To get a feel for it, tykes can hopscotch their way through a board of pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, and dollars. Another display shows how many coins make up a dollar, and the nearby “Money Balance Scale” reinforces the lesson. How many coins will it take to equal the worth of a dollar bill? Let your kids stack up the pennies and dimes to find out.

2. Why buy a car when you could buy cupcakes?
Cents & Sensibility’s displays return often to the theme of assigning value to things — and how this varies from family to family — but the display that explores it best is its “Wants and Needs” interactive. A board with knobs depicting items like a house, pizza, cupcakes, and cars allows children to shift the knobs left (to the “want” side) or right (to the “need” side). The resulting board, customized by each kid, encourages discus-
sion on necessities and luxuries, and why one might buy light bulbs before video games.

3. What’s a budget?
Before your little one collects their allowance, they might benefit from understanding a budget. Start with the definition (“a list of things that you need or want, and how much they cost”), then consider one together. A pie chart shows a sample breakdown of finances, giving visitors an idea of how money might be portioned out for things like medicine, electricity, food, education, and travel. Families are encouraged to draw up their own pie chart budgets at home.

4. Want to take a gamble?
Investing — and the risks that come with it — are undoubtedly the most complex subject Cents & Sensibility tackles. To make it accessible for preschoolers and up, the museum presents a series of graphics, charts, and activities like “Investment Plinko.” Fake coins drop into the top of a Plinko-type board and fall in various directions until landing in a slot that will determine their fortune. Green slots signal good investments; red slots mean money lost.

5. Why give your money away?
Cents & Sensibility spells out that there’s more than one way to give back to the community, whether through money, time, or kindness. If you can spare it, pass your kid a quarter to roll down the zigzagging ramps of the “Giving Feels Good” donation maze. As nearby signs explain, money collected in the maze goes to various charities. Steps away, another activity allows kids to choose the path to spending, sharing, or saving by navigating a magnetic “money ball” through a labyrinth of turns.

Cents & Sensibility opens Saturday, Jan. 12, as part of the Please Touch Museum’s permanent collection at Memorial Hall, 4231 Avenue of the Republic. The museum’s hours are Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is $19, free for children under 1. pleasetouchmuseum.org

gdickinson@philly.com
@GraceDickinson

Through graphics and hands-on activities, families learn about the financial concepts of spending, sharing, and saving in the Please Touch Museum’s new permanent exhibition.

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Ellis, 3, and his mother, Eden Coffey, learn about risk through the “Investment Plinko” inside the Cents & Sensibility exhibition.