

# Discovery Space Blends Fun, Science, Technology

By PATT KEITH

pkeith@altoonamirror.com

STATE COLLEGE — The three Orndorff children recently visited Discovery Space of Central Pennsylvania located at 1224 N. Atherton St., and raced to see the latest addition to an ever-expanding model train display created by Centre Model Railroaders.

Kevin, 9, Kennedy, 7, and Kolton, 2, visit the science and technology-based center two to three times a month and spend two to three hours exploring the more than 45 hands-on activities each time, said their mom Cassie Orndorff of Milesburg.

“There is always something new. It’s never the same,” Orndorff said. “They are really enjoying the train exhibit and seeing it change.”

The train display showcases civil engineering, woodworking, electronics, computer programming and creativity in its 400 feet of track with 40 turnouts.

Mother Lauren Cameron first brought her son Nathaniel, now age 12, and now brings his siblings: Ada, 7, and twins Sophie and Ben, 3 ½.

“It’s a great space, especially when the weather is not so nice to let a kid play and be active and explore,” she said. “After we had the twins, we loved all the programming that was available for babies and toddlers, especially.”

The Wiggle and Shake program is held on Friday mornings and the volunteers adapted programming to include Ben, who has a genetic disorder that causes some delays and disabilities, she said.

“She made sure that she had activities done from the floor at his level. She was really proactive about making sure that he could participate along with his sister. It was great,” Cameron said.

Discovery Space of Central Pennsylvania features interactive exhibits and hands-on programs designed to provide valuable informal science education, especially in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), in a fun learning environment, said Maria Barton, director of Strategic Initiatives. More than 60,000 people visit annually, according to Executive Director Michele Crowl.

Additionally, staff visit regional schools during the school year and provide a free STEM-focused program. They reached another 8-10,000 students through this service, she said. Many schools, including those from Blair County, also make arrangements to visit on a school field trip to the center.

“There’s nothing like us in the center of the state,” Crowl said.

They also help college students learn but in a different way. The center leverages its proximity to The Pennsylvania State University and collaborates with students and staff of the



Mirror photo by Patrick Waksmundski

## Ada Cameron, 7, plays the pipes at Discovery Space in State College.

Colleges of Arts and Architecture, Education, Engineering, and the Eberly College of Science to develop programs and exhibits. A recent addition is The Marine Life Center that has salt and fresh water fish tanks.

The center will hold a special event in September — a birthday party to celebrate Marine Center resident Pearl, a California Round sting ray on loan from Electric City Aquarium & Reptile Den, in Scranton.

Humans can also enjoy birthday activities at Discovery Space. For the Cameron’s, celebrating at Discovery Space eliminated the weather uncertainties surrounding Ada’s sixth birthday.

“We got burned a few times because her birthday is in early May and you never know how the weather is going to go that time of year,” Cameron said. “She had so much fun here with her friends they made slime and had fun playing.”

While Ada plays in the house where she makes meals and other pretend play activities. Her sister Sophie prefers to play in the sound and vibration room where she explores the different sounds produced by different pipe-like materials. She also likes to place her hands on a pad which activates a mallet that beats a drum in time to her heartbeat.

There’s also a dig pit where kids learn about paleontology and geology and a health care career exploration tract that is like a treasure hunt as children look for the special symbol at various stations.

In the Bee Hive area, 18-month-old Henry Anthony plays with his older brother Charlie, 8, at an exhibit that shows how earthworms burrow into the soil. Using “earthworm” cars, the boys send them clattering down the tunnels. Henry is fascinated by the motion and the sounds made as the worms race each

other. This play area features bee “wings” youngsters can wear and has interactive elements that are low to the ground for toddlers.

“It’s a nice place for parents because it’s contained but there is a lot to see and do and kids can safely run around and find things that interest them,” Barton said. “Parents can see what they are most interested in and pursue the passions that kids uncover here or things that they have a knack for or are really interested in.”

## Emphasis on Experiential Learning

Penn State Researchers Miriam Freedman and Ling-Nian Zou said their children Noam, 10, and Ezra, 7, attend the summer camp Discovery Center offers during the summer. Both children are passionate about science like their parents who do research in chemistry and physics.

“It’s a very good experience because they get exposed to a lot of STEM and it’s hands-on,” Zou said. “They do presentations, projects and writing so it helps maintain their school skills and their social skills.”

Freedman said the center mirrors the changes in science education, which has transitioned from static exhibits to being experiential, where learning happens through direct experience and reflection.

“When we do experiments in the lab, everything is hands-on and you have to come with a hypothesis. So this experiential science center teaches children better how research works,” Freedman said.

For instance, a large weather area explains and demonstrates how tornadoes form and move. A visitor can control the speed and direction and the whirling vortex shifts and changes in a miniature scale complete with a tornado’s characteristic freight-train like roar.

## If you go

**What:** Discovery Space of Central Pennsylvania

**Where:** 1224 N. Atherton St., State College

**When:** Exhibit Floor Hours, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays; Marine Life Center Hours, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays

**Admission cost:** Under 3, free; children 3-17, \$8 | Adults 18+, \$7; a one-month membership for August is \$25 and includes unlimited visits

A one-year membership starts at \$110 and offers unlimited visitation; includes Association of Science and Technology Centers membership which provides free admission to hundreds of science centers worldwide; discounts on birthday parties and programs; gift memberships available.

**NOTE:** Anyone who mentions/brings Mirror Moms in August, September and October will receive an admission discount of buy-one-get-one-free. Ask at the front desk.

*\* discount offered at admission; buy one admission and get one free during August, September and October.*

Nearby, is a television weather studio with a green screen, television monitors and a script on a teleprompter.

It’s Charlie Henry’s favorite area.

“For as long as I can remember Charlie has always been kind of obsessed with weather,” his mother Julie Anthony explained. “Even from a very young age, he wasn’t afraid of thunder storms — he was living for them.”

A year ago, Discovery Center brought in Penn State meteorology students and a local television meteorologist.

“We had to come because the weather is what he loves,” Julie Anthony said.

When children grow and get older, they can continue to learn at The Rivet, a workshop and makerspace that teaches community members how to use tools, teaches teens about careers in the trades, and hosts project and art classes for kids and adults.

It offers several 3D printers, design programs on computers, woodworking and small power tools, vinyl sign making equipment, several pottery wheels and kilns, and more.

Whether it’s at the Discovery Space or at The Rivet, many friendships are made here.

“A lot of parents meet other parents through us. If they are new to town or a new parent, it’s a nice way to talk with other adults. We find a lot of happy conversations taking place here.”