



Christmas lights preview: Tis the season (already) — and a newcomer, Kohl Children’s Museum, joins the holiday displays

By [Steve Johnson](#)

Nov 11, 2020 at 12:28 PM

This year’s holiday lights preview — in addition to the details on what the established players in this space are doing — features a new entry:

Kohl Children’s Museum come December will be mounting its first outdoor holiday lights show, “Kohlights: A Mesmertastic Holiday Lightacular.”

Yes, it seems to have been named by the writing team at “The Daily Show,” inspiration we applaud, but it’s actually conceived as an especially kid-friendly version of the homages to candlepower and goose down that have been luring Chicagoans outdoors in winter for decades now.

Indeed, “Kohlights,” featuring three highly interactive lighting displays along with others on its nearly mile-long path, is designed by the same firm that does Morton Arboretum’s 8-year-old “Illumination” (a drive-through experience this year, as detailed below).

“There’s a lot of pent-up demand for families to get out,” said Mike Delfini, president and CEO of the typically hands-on kids museum in Glenview.

As the pandemic continues through the winter, “I imagine parents are going to be having to say ‘No’ more than they say ‘Yes,’” he said. “Here’s a case where they can say, ‘Yes, lets bundle up and go.’ That’s what we’re hoping for.”

That seems likely, if the way ticket sales at the other lightfests are said to be going. That’s partly a result of eagerness to do something, anything, and partly the fault of restricted capacity in this COVID year.

In its second year, Chicago Botanic Garden's artistically inclined "Lightscape" — which begins Friday — was [mostly sold out](#) already until after Christmas. Another presentation driven more by aesthetics than sheer wattage, "Illumination," starting Nov. 20, only had [limited availability](#), mostly for later-night slots, in a quick check Wednesday morning.

There seem to be more tickets left at the more traditional and longer-running zoo displays, which also have higher crowd capacity. "Zoolights" at Lincoln Park Zoo, charging visitors \$5 for the first time this year, had [many tickets left](#) as of Wednesday, as did Brookfield Zoo's ["Holiday Magic."](#)

"Kohlights" tickets were scheduled to go [on sale Wednesday](#) afternoon, at the price of \$25 per person, child or adult.

Kohl had been considering adding holiday lights at the beginning of the year, before the pandemic threw plans worldwide into disarray, Delfini said. It was when the museum witnessed the sell-out of its Halloween "Ghost Hunt" outdoor event that it realized the hunger families have for such opportunities.

In its first year, it'll have a limited run, beginning with a preview weekend Dec. 4, then continuing Dec. 11 and running through Jan. 3. The museum will limit attendance to 100 people in the two-acre park at a time.

Hailey Featherstone of the firm Lightswitch was the lighting designer. "The interesting thing about 'Kohlights' is they are really focusing on the younger children," she said. "We get to have the top priority be fun."

To that end, the various lighting set pieces bear names such as Pixel Play Meadow, Rainbow Caterpillar and Color Square Walk. Some of the interactives will be manipulated with a glow stick each child is handed, some with a thermal heat camera that reads body movement and mimics it in light.

"We're still all about learning through play," said Delfini, while at the same time the museum wants the show to be visually satisfying for adults. "Our idea is to do a kid-sized version of the botanic garden and the Morton shows."