Art Museums And The Family Experience: How Museums Can Help Adults Become Effective Guides For Children In Their Care

Sarah J. Stewart
Seton Hall University

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Art Museums and the Family Experience: How museums can help adults become effective guides for children in their care.

By
Sarah J. Stewart

Advisor: Dr. Susan Leshnoff

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Introduction

First impressions are not always correct, but they can be long lasting. One positive family experience in an art gallery may lead to a lifelong appreciation of museums as an environment for fun and learning. However, a shared responsibility exists between the museum to provide exhibits, programs, and activities that are appropriate for family learning and the adult members of the family to encourage, share, and assist the children in discovery learning.

Families in the twenty-first century come in all shapes and sizes, including single-parent families, blended families, extended families, and co-parented families. For the purposes of this thesis, families will be considered a multigenerational social unit, of at least one significant adult, and one child.

The museum as a place for entertainment was established in the eighteenth century, with major expansions into the public educational forum occurring in the nineteenth century.¹ Museums grew with the development of governments seeking to improve the education and culture of its citizens.² Because of industrialization at the end of the nineteenth century, people moved to the cities in great numbers, and science and industry reshaped life. The government viewed museums as an institution that would provide an education for the growing public.³ In the late nineteenth century, Henry Cole became the director of the South Kensington Museum, which is now known as the Victoria and Albert Museum. As George Hein states, Cole “was engaged on a massive experiment in public education.”⁴ As an institution that was supposed to aid the public in bettering itself and improving the quality of life, the South Kensington Museum offered
programs on health education, and displayed developments in industry and technology.
The museum also served to entertain, and did so by exhibiting natural curiosities and
works of fine art.\textsuperscript{5}

By the late nineteenth-century, new theories and educational methods were
employed at museums in Europe and the United States, including the South Kensington
in their length and complexity, lectures were made available to the public, school
programs began, and community outreach was enabled.\textsuperscript{6} Hein notes that during the
1920s, curators began to view museums as a place of exclusive scholarly study, rather
than an educational institution open to the masses.\textsuperscript{7} After World War II, museums
underwent an enormous period of growth. The International Council of Museums
(ICOM) was created, as well as museum education committees, including the Committee
for Education and Cultural Action and the Education Committee (EdCom).\textsuperscript{8} The creation
of these organizations re-opened the museum as a place for public learning. Although
museums have transitioned from eighteenth century entertainment venues to twenty-first
century learning centers, the concept of a museum as an institution that can improve the
lives of its visitors has survived.\textsuperscript{9}

This thesis discusses the importance of quality family programming in art
museums and ways to achieve it, from the perspectives of family visitors and museum
professionals. Two types of family visits will be referenced, the guided visit and the
unguided visit. A guided visit refers to a family that chooses to have a museum educator
lead them through exhibits. An unguided visit refers to a family that participates in the
museum experience using materials provided by the museum’s education department, but
is not guided through the exhibits by a staff member. Chapter 1 reviews the psychology of family learning, including the need for social learning, and educational theories related to the various styles in which people learn. Chapter 2 provides family-friendly methods for understanding and discussing art. Chapter 3 outlines techniques for adults to ensure a positive visit to the museum for their family, including thoughts about before and after the visit. Chapter 4 details what museums and museum professionals can do to improve the quality of family programming. Exemplary models of family programming in museums will be discussed in chapter 5. The final chapter provides insight on the future of family programming in museums.
Chapter 1
Psychology of Family Learning

According to Falk and Dierking, "proportionately, families are the largest museum audience...and most come to learn."\(^{10}\) Although every family unit is unique, the ways in which families learn are often similar. Most families learn as a social construct, using various learning theories. Significant adults, regardless of family composition, can be effective learning models for their children, and every person provides his or her own narrative view of education.

Lynn Dierking interviewed family audiences in museums to discover the primary reason for their visits. She found that their choices were strongly influenced by the adult's perception that museums are "good places to take children to learn."\(^{11}\) Her research also supports the idea that families use museums as socially mediated meaning-making environments.\(^{12}\) Knowing this, it is important to consider how families accept the challenge of learning together and what methods of adaptation they have formed to best meet their needs as a family.

Learning as a social construct

Studies by museum specialists, Falk and Dierking, demonstrate that learning is almost always socially mediated. They concluded that because humans are social organisms, people have the most success learning in an environment of shared knowledge.\(^{13}\) Simply, people learn while talking to, listening to, and watching other people; they incorporate the ideas of others into their own. Falk and Dierking found that an individual's emotional and physical reactions to stimuli are also variations of
constructs learned during social situations. People learn within settings that supply both physical and psychological knowledge.\textsuperscript{14}

Pitman believes that most museum visitors' learning experiences occur through social exchanges.\textsuperscript{15} According to her, asking questions, pointing out a favorite piece, even looking at a floor plan are all social/educational situations. Because museums both educate and entertain, Pitman found that visitors hope that everyone in their group will engage in learning and enjoy their time together.\textsuperscript{16}

When families choose to go to a museum, they are participating in a free-choice learning activity. The term free-choice learning that was coined by Dierking represents the family's decision to spend time together in an environment that is conducive to learning.\textsuperscript{17} The research of Lisa Roberts reflects that family visitors may not realize that they are building emotional connections by spending a few hours together in a museum, but they do realize that a positive experience is measured as much by their interaction with one another and the overall mood of their group, as with the objects and exhibits they observe.\textsuperscript{18}

Pitman notes that how children and their significant adults understand what they see and read at the museum varies widely. In the museum setting, visitors can learn by modeling members of their own social group, other peer groups, or museum staff and volunteers. For example, if a child sees his or her significant adult or a peer listening to an exhibit recording, the child is likely to model this behavior by listening to the headset as well.\textsuperscript{19} Pitman asserts that social interaction is a critical part of the learning process for young children. It provides opportunities to observe and imitate the behavior of older children, learn to solve problems, and resolve differences.\textsuperscript{20}
Seemingly the most common form of communication among family members is verbal interaction. Falk and Dierking maintain that “conversation is a primary activity of knowledge construction.” Hensel’s research suggests that families with children interact, converse, and provide information for one another in recognizable, patterned ways that are repeated throughout the visit. According to Falk and Dierking, the museum visit in its entirety can be viewed as one large-group conversation, with various subject changes, and frequent beginnings and endings. Their research demonstrates that the conversations of families tend to be close and personal. Although they talk about topics described in labels on exhibits, families do not read/pay attention to the entire text if doing so interferes with the group’s ability to enjoy and maintain social relationships. Studies by McManus indicate that many of the conversations held by families while in the museum continue after they leave. This is important to note, because both positive and negative feelings will be reflected upon, and likely remembered.

Falk and Dierking write that “the first time one is in a new environment loaded with sensory novelty, one experiences that setting through all the senses.” Because every individual comes to the museum with varying amounts of life experience and prior knowledge, Falk and Dierking note that family members focus on and notice different aspects of an exhibition’s theme. Once an individual has had the opportunity to reflect on a particular concept, that idea is usually brought to the group to construct a shared meaning for the exhibition.

According to Roberts, one benefit of visiting a museum as a family unit is the opportunity for the older members of the group to share their personal experiences with the younger family members. For some visitors, objects and exhibits spark memories.
Roberts states that the museum can become a venue for “remembering, retelling, and re-experiencing significant moments and people in their lives.”

For other visitors, fantasies, rather than memories, may be inspired by objects and exhibits. Roberts believes this experience allows families to share creative projections of history, creating a mental time machine of sorts. A child looking at a landscape may imagine himself as a pioneer getting ready for an expedition. Whether families regard the museum as a place for imaginary escapes, or one of grounded exploration, the museum remains an ideal location for social interaction and learning. Roberts notes that “personal involvement—making a personal or human connection, exploring self-identity, engaging in introspection—describes an aspect of museum experience that, for some visitors, forms the basis and meaning of their visit.”

Falk and Dierking demonstrate that social groups, and family groups in particular, are the primary learning environment for humans. Their study also shows that learning occurring in a social environment has a greater chance of being retained in the long-term memory.

Learning Styles

Howard Gardner argues that “an intelligence” is an ability that allows people to solve problems or create products that are valued in one or more cultures. Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences maintains that all individuals possess seven intelligences that are relatively independent of one another: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Each individual can display variations of aptitude for each one. A person may channel a specific intelligence or a combination of them as he or she deems necessary to solve a particular type of problem.
For example, an individual with heightened bodily-kinesthetic intelligence may learn more about Native American pottery by crafting his or her own clay pot, rather than reading a label about the art piece.

Waterfall and Grusin state that one of the things children love about visiting a museum is that it gives them an opportunity to learn about things the way they want to learn.\textsuperscript{36} Using Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, Waterfall and Grusin identified four basic museum-going styles of children, the Researcher, the Hit and Run Champ, the Button-Pusher, and the Dreamer.\textsuperscript{37} The Researcher is the child who likes to take his or her time reading labels and looking carefully at each exhibit as they are arranged in a particular room. The Hit and Run Champ likes to jump from room to room, looking briefly at all the exhibits before choosing where to begin. The Button-Pusher desires a hands-on learning experience, and may become bored with reading labels. Finally, the Dreamer is the child who has an active imagination and projects him or herself into the exhibit or idea being presented.\textsuperscript{38}

The Learning Style Inventory developed by David Kolb identifies four learning styles that people have for perceiving and processing information: concrete experience (feeling), reflective observation (watching), abstract conceptualization (thinking), and active experimentation (doing).\textsuperscript{39} Families visiting a museum may utilize all four of Kolb’s learning styles. Each member of the social group will experience the learning styles in a different manner. Simply by visiting the museum and noticing the physical space, the temperature, and the pace of the crowd, the family has participated in the concrete experience aspect of Kolb’s theory. In an art museum there is certainly an opportunity for families to observe and think about each piece. Finally, active
experimentation, or the doing aspect of Kolb’s learning styles, can be achieved by participating in a tour group and asking questions, or group participation in family programming activities.

Falk and Dierking identify another commonly observed behavior pattern among families on museum visits, referred to as “learning by observation,” or “modeling.” Modeling is the ability to learn by copying the behavior of other members of one’s society. It is a critical stage of early development, although it continues to be a useful learning method through adulthood. In Lev Vygotsky’s learning theory framework, “when a group is confronted with a concept to teach or a problem to solve, the knowledge or skill of any one group member influences the roles every other group member will play in relation to one another.” Group members with the most knowledge will support the learning of members who have less knowledge or experience. This learning technique is called scaffolding. Scaffolding can take the form of questions, cues, or other learning supports. It is complementary with the learning method of modeling.

Alfred North Whitehead defined three stages of learning: romance, precision, and generalization in The Aims of Education. Pitman’s re-telling of Whitehead’s framework within a museum setting defined the three stages. “Romance means the enticement of the viewer with the wonder of the dinosaur, the mummy, or the Monet. It is the heady moment of seduction that draws you in and makes you want to see and understand more.” The Romance stage encapsulates the process of learning through discovery, curiosity, and exploration. It includes the moments of trying things out, looking at a subject for the first time, and celebrating the new and the different. In the next stage of learning, Precision, the learner gathers information and absorbs it based on its relevance
to his or her life and prior knowledge. Pitman suggests that the Precision stage of learning can occur through careful looking, reading labels, participating in a tour, or comparing objects that are arranged in the exhibition. The learner is actively analyzing and selecting which new ideas to incorporate into his or her learning repertoire. The last stage of learning is Generalization. In this stage, the learner is able to transform newly acquired knowledge and place it into contextual experiences. In essence, the learner organizes information into a framework and combines it with new information to create new knowledge and meaning.

Falk and Dierking assert that people pay attention to things that interest them. A person’s interests are determined by previous experiences, knowledge, skills, feelings, and reinforcement of those elements. No two people perceive, store, and recall information in exactly the same way. In the free-choice learning environment of a museum, Falk and Dierking believe the interests and beliefs of each family member will play an integral role in their perception of the museum as a place for learning and entertainment. The work of Jerome Bruner demonstrates that in order for learning, especially discovery learning to be successful, the learner must have an expectation that there is something worth learning. Bruner’s study reveals that without the desire or motivation to learn, individuals accomplish relatively small amounts of learning.

**Significant Adults as Learning Models**

Visiting a museum with a child is distinctly different than going alone or with other adults. However, the methods of discovery and learning among adults and children are relatively similar. Waterfall and Grusin note that “although adults may act and express themselves differently from children, a child is just as able to think, feel, form
opinions, and make judgments as any adult in the family.\textsuperscript{49} The distinguishing point among adults and children in a family unit is the quantity of experiences they have had. Adults are storage vaults of experiences. Waterfall and Grusin believe that these experiences determine the way they perceive their surroundings and circumstances, and create a feeling of confidence about what can be expected in similar environments.\textsuperscript{50} A child is less sure of how the world works. This lack of certainty is not necessarily an unfortunate attribute; it is likely to bring a fresh viewpoint to the museum visit that an adult is not able to bring.\textsuperscript{51}

According to Falk and Dierking, “parents can be effective facilitators for their children’s learning when exhibitions are designed with collaborative learning in mind and when adults feel comfortable with the content and experiences provided in the museum.”\textsuperscript{52} Because children frequently turn to the significant adults in their lives with questions, adults, who want to be the authority on any subject can feel a certain amount of pressure. In an effort to answer a child’s questions, many adults try to present confusing, and incorrect information. However, at the museum the answers to questions are readily available to adults and children. The family can turn to the exhibit if they are on an unguided exploration, or to the staff, on a guided visit when they need help solving problems.\textsuperscript{53}

The research of Waterfall and Grusin reflects that children retain what significant adults tell them far longer than information they get from any other source. This is true even if the information is not accurate.\textsuperscript{54} Many exhibits are designed to give adults basic information quickly and clearly to help them answer children’s questions. According to Waterfall and Grusin, if the label or other materials do not provide enough information, a
parent who says, "I don’t know; let’s find out," is cultivating a positive attitude about researching and learning in the child. In some instances, children may know answers that adults do not know or can find creative solutions to a problem. When children are encouraged to share their knowledge, they become more confident and enthusiastic about museum-going.

Waterfall and Grusin have found that parents and significant adults are far more willing to take advantage of in-house library materials, family activity kits, and other opportunities to participate in this community of practice if they know that these materials are available and understand their role in providing assistance to their children.

A Narrative View of Education

According to Lisa Roberts, a narrative view of education occurs when an individual’s understanding of new material is processed and organized relative to his or her prior knowledge. For example, a child looking at a painting of a tiger may say, “It looks like Mrs. Johnson’s cat.” Because the child has no prior experience with tigers, he relates the physical features of the tiger to an animal he is familiar with, Mrs. Johnson’s cat. Roberts suggests that in the museum setting, a narrative view of education supposes that visitors’ experiences are shaped as much by who they are as by what museums are like. Museums create opportunities for communication and meaning-making. Every individual constructs a narrative relative to the ideas that he or she believes are communicated, even if those ideas are not a part of the museum’s intended concepts.

In any given museum, visitors may encounter many similar objects and such physical spaces as an entryway, exhibits, and perhaps a restaurant or gift shop. However,
each person will come away with a unique experience and interpretation because every
visitor is engaged in constructing a narrative about what he or she sees.
Chapter 2

Young at Art: Family-Friendly Approaches to Understanding Art

Waterfall and Grusin coined the term “young at art” to describe individuals who are not familiar with art. For families who are young at art, the whole subject of art may be new, or the vocabulary used to describe art may seem unfamiliar or strange for families who are new to the museum experience. This should not discourage families from visiting an art museum. There are many ways to interpret and understand art. Methods that are often easy and fun for children and adults to approach art appreciation include the aesthetic approach, creating a story, the elements of art approach, and reading a painting.

Aesthetic Approach

Waterfall and Grusin explain the aesthetic approach to art as a viewer’s initial, uncensored, natural response to a work of art. Like adults, it is certain that children feel something about a painting—good, bad, or indifferent. The language a child uses to express these reactions frequently differs from what an adult might expect. It can be misleading and embarrassing when a child says, “I don’t like it,” or “I think it’s dumb.” The most important piece of advice for adults to remember is to avoid showing displeasure with any form of aesthetic response from the child. As Waterfall and Grusin state, “by shushing the child who giggles at a nude statue or frowning when a child rushes at a painting shouting loudly, ‘There’s my dog,’ adults tell a child that his aesthetic responses cannot be trusted, that they are not what they should be.”
For the young at art--those who are unfamiliar with art objects--an appropriate art vocabulary may not be in place yet. This is understandable, but the opportunity to offer a personal interpretation still exists. Some families may be uncomfortable expressing their feelings in a public setting. There are many works of art that evoke unpleasant feelings like sadness or grief. Waterfall and Grusin suggest that, “for visitors who have difficulty sharing personal feelings, it may be helpful to note a few phrases that help draw out the words. Try starting sentences with ‘this painting reminds me of--,’ or, ‘When I look at this painting, I feel--.’”

One of the great things about a museum is that there is no test at the end. If a family does not find something appealing in a gallery, there is nothing wrong with leaping forward centuries in time and going on to see another gallery. The aesthetic approach to art is significant because it encourages sharing between adults and children, rather than solely acquiring art facts. Adult’s can foster this form of learning by accepting, without censoring, a child’s response to art.

Creating a Story

Making up a story about a work of art is a fun way to take a closer look at the details in art. Creating a story allows viewers to enter an imaginary world with ease. An adult’s willingness to participate affects the story. Studies by Waterfall and Grusin suggest that “if the adult’s participation is limited to asking “what-happened-next” questions, then the story does not have an adult co-author. Instead, the activity has become a form of interview.” Telling a story is a creative process in itself and can help build appreciation of the details that an artist represented in a work.
Elements of Art Approach

Waterfall and Grusin identify the basic elements of art as color, line, shape, and texture.\textsuperscript{73} An artist utilizes each one of these elements in different combinations to create a work of art.\textsuperscript{74} On the first few visits to an art museum a family may feel overwhelmed visually. However, families probably know more about the elements of art than they realize. Almost everybody can identify colors and recognize shapes. For Waterfall and Grusin, the key to utilizing the Elements of Art Approach is "using the eye to find an interesting area and enjoying the new perspective."\textsuperscript{75}

Color is probably the most recognizable art element. It can influence a person's feeling of the work and is often what is remembered most.\textsuperscript{76} Line as an element is a little more subtle than color, but equally important. Many works of art have clearly defined lines. Sometimes sculptures or abstract works of art use the shape of an object as the line. As with color, the properties of line affect the viewer's feelings about a painting.\textsuperscript{77} Waterfall and Grusin suggest that "children pretend there is no color in the painting, just the lines or outlines. Sometimes children can focus on one element of they are allowed to edit out the strong element of color."\textsuperscript{78} Once a family has discussed the element of lines, adults can help refine specific vocabulary. The research of Waterfall and Grusin reflect that "when an adult says, 'That line running from side to side,' the meaning is clear to the child. As adults see confidence growing in the children, words like "horizontal" or "vertical," when shared, become gifts not instructions."\textsuperscript{79} When adults help their children acquire new vocabulary relative to their children's understanding of a concept, it can ease the process of discussing a work of art.
Children are often very good at identifying shapes, but as with line, Waterfall and Grusin suggest that it may help a child to visually peel away the colors of an object in order to concentrate solely on the shapes. The texture of an object is defined by how it would feel to touch it. In an art museum, texture can only be experienced visually. Color, line, and shape can be navigated mentally in a way texture cannot. A child must be able to make the connection between the way an object looks and the way it might feel. Waterfall and Grusin suggest that “an adult who uses vocabulary that excites the senses, such as, “mushy,” “gritty,” and “smooth as steel,” helps a child enjoy texture without having to touch it with his hands.”

Reading a Painting

Children and adults are often excited by the prospect of learning to read a painting without having to read words. Waterfall and Grusin believe that by looking for clues in a work of art, the historical and cultural content can come to life. This approach is based on what can be learned directly from a work of art, not on how much history the adult or child might know. Studies by Waterfall and Grusin reflect that, “most of the history can be discovered together by sharing close observations of the work. Styles of clothes, hair, and architecture serve to date a work of art.” Looking at dates and places of birth on the label is a good place to start the discussion. The success of this approach comes from fitting the historical clues in the piece with the experiences of the family, according to Waterfall and Grusin. A brief discussion of history facts may be suitable for some families, although others may find it too dry and an approach that is too much like school. Waterfall and Grusin note that, “the tendency for many adults is to share everything they
know about the work, the artist, and the subject of the painting with a child; but, in fact, a child does not need to be told anything to appreciate it.\textsuperscript{87}

No matter which method a family uses to explore a work of art, the most important goal is to enjoy the experience of looking and learning. Visitors go to art museums to see works of art, and to create new ideas based on another person's interpretation of the world.\textsuperscript{88} Sometimes children will also make a connection between a work of art and his or her life. Other times, according to Waterfall and Grusin; a child will be satisfied with just looking.\textsuperscript{89} They reinforce that "there is no right or wrong way to view art; neither is there a right or wrong way to feel about it. Remember that all that is really required is the willingness to look together. Every museum-goer already knows enough to make the looking meaningful."\textsuperscript{90}
Chapter 3

What Significant Adults can do to Improve a Museum Visit

Before bringing a family to the museum, a significant adult should know how to prepare the group for the visit, how to fully participate in the museum experience, and how to enjoy the visit even after the family has left the museum. As Waterfall and Grusin state, “families are important. With regard to museum visits, children are influenced just by the fact that they are there in a special place with their family.” 91 Sometimes children and adults seem like adversaries. Adults enforce good behavior, oversee homework, and assign chores. Museums offer adults a chance to be an advocate, a friend, and a helper. Becoming the advocate means that the adult is helping to create opportunities. 92

Falk and Dierking note that many children may not enter a gallery space with sufficient prior knowledge to make informed associations. 93 It therefore becomes the responsibility of the adult to help the child recognize and understand the concepts presented that relate, in some form, to the life experience and prior knowledge of the child. 94 Taylor’s research shows that discussions held by family members in the museum often provide adults with the opportunity to reinforce past experiences and family history and develop a shared understanding among family members. 95

When deciding whether a child is ready to go to a certain kind of museum, adults must remember that their enthusiasm can be very infectious. According to Waterfall and Grusin’s research, what gives an adult pleasure can give children pleasure. 96 Although the interest of an adult may spark that of a child, a child’s developmental stage will ultimately determine the amount of looking he or she will do. 97
The 4 B’s

While every museum experience is different, Waterfall and Grusin’s suggestions for creating a positive family museum outing are very useful. According to these researchers, there are four B’s in a successful museum visit: Behavior, the Building, the Break, and Bathrooms.98 Many significant adults worry about how their child might behave in a museum. Prior to visiting, it is a good idea for significant adults and children to discuss how visitors act at the museum. Waterfall and Grusin state that talking about public behavior accomplishes three things. First, the child will understand what behaviors are acceptable and what is not. Children are comfortable with knowing and following rules. Second, it creates a reference point, such as, “Remember when we talked about this.” Third, the child can assume responsibility for his or her own behavior.99 Although discussing appropriate behavior is important, over focusing on behavior can prevent everyone in the family from enjoying the museum.100

An often-overlooked part of a museum visit is the museum building. Waterfall and Grusin reflect that while adults are equally affected by the uniqueness of the museum building, they may consider the physical space unworthy of the family’s attention.101 It is important to realize that for many children, a museum may be the first building of such size that they have encountered. Children who are newcomers to the museum experience will be intensely aware of how different this space is compared to their home.102 Feeling secure in the museum’s physical space is imperative for everyone’s successful museum going. A child who is given a few minutes to observe the building and peek at a floor plan will feel important and confident inside the space. Waterfall and Grusin state that “by taking time during the first part of the visit to guarantee the child’s security, the
family can proceed with their visit assured that they now know where they are and what the building looks like.\textsuperscript{103}

The third “B” stands for break. Children routinely think about when they will be eating. During a museum visit, the best way to cope with these thoughts is to incorporate the break into the museum visit routine.\textsuperscript{104} Museum cafes can be expensive and often do not carry items that are appetizing for children. Waterfall and Grusin suggest that when possible, adults can bring a bag lunch to eat in the museum courtyard, a nearby park, or even in the event of rain, in the family car.\textsuperscript{105} Some museums will allow families to eat pre-packaged food in the café, especially during poor weather.\textsuperscript{106} Children will appreciate food that is familiar to them, and adults will be saving money as well as keeping everyone happy. Waterfall and Grusin remind adults that most museums will not allow any food or drink in the galleries.\textsuperscript{107} Adults should remember to check the location of water fountains on the floor plan. Sometimes a little sip of water is all that is needed for a child to feel satisfied.\textsuperscript{108}

Before any museum visit truly begins, Waterfall and Grusin suggest that adults know where the bathroom is and at what distance, since they are not always centrally located.\textsuperscript{109} Bathroom emergencies are less frequent if families make a point of using the facilities before they enter an exhibit.\textsuperscript{110}

Participating in the Museum Visit

The research of Waterfall and Grusin notes that the most valuable thing an adult can do to make an art museum visit a positive experience is to be an attentive listener and observer of the child’s reactions, interests and interactions within the museum. Simply
by being willing to listen, adults show how they value the time shared with their children at the museum.\textsuperscript{111}

While it is important for adults to encourage the interests of a child and let them guide the agenda of a museum visit, it does not mean that adults need to be timid about participating. In fact, one role that adults can take is that of offering choices. As Waterfall and Grusin state, “some children need verbal prompts when their interest begins to wane. ‘Would you like to look out the window?’ ‘Should we go to the next room? Should we go downstairs?’ These types of choices gently and encouragingly direct the children to look elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{112}

Building relationships with guards and docents also makes the museum visit more personal. A guide who shares interesting personal opinions about a work of art seems more like a friend and less like a stranger who has memorized a speech.\textsuperscript{113} Waterfall and Grusin note that although many adults take meeting and speaking with new people for granted, children do not.\textsuperscript{114} Some children even ask for a return visit to a museum with the sole purpose of visiting the docent or guard.\textsuperscript{115} The research of Waterfall and Grusin has shown that for young children especially, the connection with people is often greater than relationships with places or things within a museum setting.\textsuperscript{116}

According to Waterfall and Grusin, many opportunities are missed at museums because parents often feel rushed or not wanting to bother anyone.\textsuperscript{117} Contrary to this belief, most museum guides are willing to diverge from their routine speeches.\textsuperscript{118} Parents need to be aware of this willingness and encourage their children to ask questions. They also need to be ready to step in and ask the question themselves when they see an opportunity passing.\textsuperscript{119}
Waterfall and Grusin observe that many adults view a visit to an art museum as the supreme test of a child's behavior.¹²⁰ These adults are constantly worried that the child will touch the objects or embarrass the family in some way with inappropriate behavior.¹²¹ As discussed earlier, proper behavior in a museum is important, but there is no reason for significant adults to feel as if their children are on display instead of the art.¹²² "Children who know an adult is genuinely interested in what they see and think are less likely to misbehave because they are secure in knowing somebody cares about them and their thoughts."¹²³

Sometimes the physical layout of a museum may hinder a family’s enjoyment. Waterfall and Grusin note that a common problem that families encounter is the lighting of the art. Many museums and galleries hang art too high for the average child to get a good perspective.¹²⁴ According to Waterfall and Grusin, most paintings are lit for someone who is five-feet-two to five-feet-ten.¹²⁵ Anyone who is taller or shorter has to compensate. These authors suggest that children view works from another angle, either across the room from the piece, standing to one side, or even sitting on the gallery floor in order to reduce glare and see a work properly.¹²⁶ In some instances, the gallery may be too crowded for children to see and enjoy the art.¹²⁷

After the Visit

After leaving the museum, Waterfall and Grusin suggest that adults discuss the experience with their child. Even if the child did not have a good time this visit, adults should maintain a positive attitude about the museum, so as not to discourage future visits.¹²⁸ Once at home, children can reflect on their experience through their play. One of the best ways for children to understand the visual concepts of art is to give them the
opportunity to create their own masterpiece.\textsuperscript{129} Waterfall and Grusin write that “children who have held a paintbrush, mixed endless colors, or faced an empty page approach a work of art with an understanding that comes only from doing. Also, by doing art, the child’s capacity to appreciate the works of other artists is undeniably strengthened.”\textsuperscript{130} Waterfall and Grusin also recommend a visit to the gift shop for postcards as another inexpensive way for a child to remember his or her museum experience. The postcards will remind the child of what he or she saw, and will perhaps inspire him or her to show and tell someone else about the museum visit.\textsuperscript{131}
Chapter 4

How Museums Facilitate Family Learning

Museums are unique in that they must cater to a large and diverse audience. Exhibit spaces must be created with careful thought regarding content and physical space. The museum must also strike a balance between becoming an educational and recreational venue. Although museums welcome many guests, finding a more diverse audience is always a goal.

Studies conducted in 1992 by Falk and Dierking reflect that the estimated number of people who visit museums each year is approximately 500 million. Their study also concluded that most people who visit museums go in a family group, with parents between the ages of thirty and fifty and children between the ages of eight and twelve. According to Falk and Dierking, the highest rate of family attendance in museums were found at children’s museums, closely followed by zoos and science centers. Less than ten percent of all visitors at art museums are families.

According to Talboys, family visits “are rarely planned more than a day in advance, reflecting nothing more than an impulse to visit the museum.” He states that when families visit on an impulse basis, they may wish to have a free, unstructured visit. That does not mean, however, that they would not appreciate the chance to participate in activities that can be done on a family basis. When planning family programs, Talboys notes that it is imperative for museums to provide an environment and events in which the entire family can participate, rather than providing activities for the children to do while the adults do something else. In addition, he observes that families voluntarily
visit the museum, because they view it as an educational place for learning. Pitman’s research reflects that in addition to being a learning environment, significant adults also consider the museum to be a safe place for social interaction and play.

Family Audiences and Exhibit Spaces

Because a family is composed of individuals of varying ages, intellectual abilities, attention spans, physical limitations and life experiences, Dierking notes that planning an exhibition that will cater to everyone’s needs is a difficult task. Before museum staff can prepare exhibit spaces suited for family audiences, it is necessary to understand the viewing habits of such social units. According to Dierking’s studies conducted in 1992, there are four phases that seem to encompass the typical museum visit: 1) “an orientation phase, lasting 3-10 minutes, when visitors begin their tour and become familiar with the surroundings; 2) intense exhibit viewing, lasting 25-30 minutes, when visitors concentrate attention on exhibits, reading labels and interacting in an exhibit-directed fashion; 3) exhibit skimming, lasting 30-40 minutes, when visitors scan exhibits quickly, infrequently reading labels; and 4) preparation for departure, lasting 5-10 minutes, when visitors prepare to exit the museum.” Every family is different, of course, and will allocate their time in different ways. Dierking notes that a family’s familiarity with a particular museum will affect the amount of time that is spent in each phase of the time model. For example, a family that is making a repeat visit to a museum already has an understanding of the floorplan and what exhibits will be of interest to them; therefore, their orientation period will likely be shorter than families visiting for the first time.

Dierking’s research shows that regular museum visitors may spend more time in the
exhibition spaces, because they have become accustomed to museum fatigue and have created strategies for dealing with this distraction.\textsuperscript{143}

It is imperative for museum employees to try and understand how family visitors will experience the museum space before designing an exhibit. According to Falk and Dierking, when a family visits a museum, they read some labels, participate in some of the activities available to them, and try to learn something new.\textsuperscript{144} Part of a family’s learning will stem from their own discussion of objects. Falk and Dierking discovered that these discussions generally begin with ideas that are closely related to the object or the entire exhibit. However, as the conversation progresses, it is common for ideas to only distantly relate to an object.\textsuperscript{145} This style of learning may seem to contrast with the museum’s ideal expectation of social discussions about the works on display. However, Falk and Dierking believe it is important for the family to be able to relate on a personal level with something in the exhibit.\textsuperscript{146}

Falk and Dierking indicate that “families are attempting to be model museum visitors, but that they are also frequently disoriented, overwhelmed by the quantity and level of material, and desperately trying to personalize the information they are processing, all within the context of the social interaction of the group.”\textsuperscript{147} These feelings of disorientation and overwhelming intellectual stimulation, combined with museum fatigue, can lead to an uncomfortable experience. Falk and Dierking recommend that museum exhibition designers consider Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which states that an individual needs the basic accommodations of food, water, shelter, etc. before being able to pursue higher cognitive processes, when designing an exhibition.\textsuperscript{148}
They write that “a museum that attends to visitors’ physical needs will be able to address their intellects.”

Falk and Dierking note that even the most accommodating and compelling exhibit will not be able to draw an adult away from the needs and desires of a child. A child who is unhappy, hungry, or tired will be able to prompt an early exit from the museum. A child’s need to go to the restroom will also take precedence over interest in an exhibit. Falk and Dierking write that “even a conversation about dinner, or what to wear to a social event the next day frequently takes precedence over conversations about exhibits.” This information should not discourage museum exhibition planning committees. With careful consideration of themes, label copy, and navigation of the exhibit space, museum employees will be able to interest even a family who visits for a short amount of time.

**Museums as a Recreational Resource**

As an arena for learning and entertainment, museums should provide family activity packs that contain a variety of informal activities with language that is easy to understand. Basic items such as word searches, coloring/sketching books, puzzles, and stories are suggested by Talboys as fun items for families to use. He also notes that it is extremely important that any activity have a clear set of directions so that the family’s time is spent doing the project, not figuring out what to do. This includes creating resources printed in a second language, in addition to English. According to Talboys the goal of any activity pack is to create games, puzzles, and worksheets that will enhance a visitor’s understanding of the objects on display. New materials should be produced on a regular basis to keep returning families interested.
As an alternative to regular family programs, Pitman observes that some museums choose to organize special family festivals that occur one to four times a year, depending on the institution, gathering a broad audience of children and adults. According to Pitman, the positive side to festivals is that they are fun and educational, and they feel like a special occasion. However, some families may find the crowded space overwhelming. Pitman also notes that some art museums charge a fee for the festivals to cover the cost of art supplies, which can be expensive for an adult who is bringing more than one child. As an alternative to family festivals, Pitman discovered that some museums sponsor field trips for families. The trips may involve visiting an artist's studio, hiking on a nature trail, or creating large sand sculptures on the beach. Pitman notes that the trips allow adults and children to spend meaningful time together, without having to battle long lines at a particular craft table in a festival environment.

Historically, visiting a museum was a true form of entertainment; visitors to museums encountered strange and unusual objects, but nonetheless they were visually and intellectually stimulated. As theme parks expand their offerings, Falk and Dierking suggest that museum staff will have to work harder to meet the expectations of their audience and define their niche in the leisure market. Falk and Dierking write that "museums, for example, do not try to prevent visitors from having an enjoyable visit, nor does the visitor object to an educational message; in fact, the visitor expects it and would be disappointed if there were no educational value to a museum experience. But the visitor also wishes to have a pleasant time with his social group."

Falk and Dierking report that making museums entertaining does not mean trivializing exhibits, but it does suggest that exhibition spaces be designed to encourage a
variety of emotional responses. Studies by Falk and Dierking reflect that exhibits that actively engage the visitor intellectually and physically will be remembered as fun and entertaining. They note that a visitor’s museum experience extends to the gift shop, food service, and restrooms; any opportunity for social exchange in the museum should also be an opportunity to enhance customer service. Some art museums sacrifice a key element of social exchange, conversation, by encouraging silence. Here families may begin to feel unwanted and out of place if they cannot ask questions of one another without whispering, notes Falk and Dierking.
Chapter 5
Exemplary Family Programs

There are thousands of art museums across the United States, many with good family programming. Three museums have been selected for analysis of family programming, based on their location within the country, the diversity of their collections, and their consistency in delivering exceptional programs for families.

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, located in Washington, D.C. is a part of the Smithsonian Institution. Every Saturday, from 11:30 am – 2:00 pm, children ages five to eleven are invited to tour the museum with a significant adult. Each tour has a theme, i.e. searching for flags, bridges, tiles, etc. After spending time in the gallery, families are invited to participate in a related workshop. The Saturday programs are free, and no registration is required.¹⁷¹

Several times throughout the year, the museum hosts days of family fun on Saturdays, which include art activities and refreshments on the plaza, performers, and treasure hunts in the galleries. Each year a special culture is celebrated for one family day. On May 11, 2002, the museum is hosting a Brazilian family day. The day will be focused on the art and culture of Ernesto Neto, a Brazilian sculptor and installation artist. Participating families will experience traditional Brazilian music, storytelling, arts and crafts, dance, and food. There will also be a demonstration of “capoeira angola,” the combination of martial arts and dance brought to Brazil by African slaves. Families will have the opportunity to learn to dance the samba and play the berimbau.¹⁷²
To celebrate Black History Month, the museum focuses its family activities on an African American artist. On February 24, 2002, Jacob Lawrence, one of the first African-Americans to receive recognition as an important contributor to the history of modern art, was portrayed by actor Lawrence Allen in a biographical performance. After the performance, a museum educator provided a gallery talk on the work of the artist. A treasure hunt in the gallery and a paper craft activity was also available to participants.\textsuperscript{173}

The Hirshhorn Museum provides free family guides to those who request them. This guide consists of twenty cards with a picture of an object on the front, and a series of questions on the reverse of each card. They are intended to serve as a self-guide for families. The questions on the cards are provided to help families understand interesting elements in the work, information about the artist, and events in history. Relevant vocabulary words with their definitions are also included on the cards. In addition, the family is encouraged to keep the cards, at no cost; when the children return home they have a souvenir that will help them remember what they learned at the museum.\textsuperscript{174}

Art Institute of Chicago

The Art Institute of Chicago is situated in the middle of the Windy City. The museum offers numerous family programs that are free with museum admission. In July 2000, the Art Institute received the Program for Art Museums and Communities (PAMC) grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts.\textsuperscript{175} This grant was used to develop the continuing program for families, "Looking at Art Together: Families and Lifelong Learning." This program provides art activities for families on Saturdays. Some of the crafts included in the March/April 2002 sessions are creating a puppet with moving parts inspired by dancing Ganesha, the Hindu god with an elephant head and human body. Using paint
and metallic paper, families can create a gold-backed painting that honors a person or quality that he/she treasures; and families can enjoy participating in the photography studio where they can create photograms using found objects and light sensitive paper. Exhibits in the education center change every two months. In an ongoing exhibit, families explored illustrations of children’s books from around the world, including Japan, Korea, Belgium, France, Slovakia, and Slovenia. International children’s books were also available for close examination in the Family Room.¹⁷⁶

The Touch Gallery exhibits five portrait sculptures representing different time periods and places of origin. Through touch, visitors can discover aspects of these artworks that cannot be learned through sight alone. This exhibit puts stories and art together. Children are encouraged to look at art, listen to stories, play an interactive computer game, and write their own story about their favorite work of art while exploring the Telling Images exhibition. This exhibition is a collaborative project of Chicago architect Stanley Tigerman, the art team, a group of children ages seven to twelve, and the Department of Museum Education.¹⁷⁷

On Sundays, the Art Institute of Chicago encourages families to draw together. Morning sessions are for participants ages six to eight, while ages nine and up participate in afternoon sessions. Families learn basic drawing techniques while sketching from art in the museums’ galleries with instruction from a museum educator.¹⁷⁸

The Parent-Child Workshop, an innovative and important family program, has been developed by the Art Institute. While adults receive instruction from museum educators on how to enjoy a pleasurable, productive, enriching, and fun visit to the museum with a child, the children can participate in a separate artmaking activity in a
studio next door. Each three-hour parent workshop begins with a presentation concerning children, art, and families, led by a child-development professional. Next, family programming staff members lead the significant adults through the galleries to discuss techniques for engaging children when looking at art. Finally, the children are reunited with their significant adults, and everyone visits the galleries together. This program is free, but registration is required. Parents, grandparents, and other caregivers are all welcome to attend. Although participating in a three-hour workshop may not be practical for every family, the program is important because it creates a forum of significant adults and museum staff who can share ideas on how to help children enjoy an art museum experience. If families have enough time to participate in this program, it would be extremely worthwhile.179

The Art Institute tries to assist significant adults bringing children to the museum by providing them with suggestions for a successful visit before, during, and after the museum experience. These suggestions can be found on the museum website, where adults can review them while they are planning their visit. The museum suggests that adults discuss with their children the reason why objects are at the museum. It is easy for a child to understand the need to save items that are very important, and why it is special for the museum to share them with visitors.180

Another great suggestion from the family programming staff is to allow children to explore the museum’s collection online. Adults can find out what exhibits excite their children. By knowing this information, planning the visit becomes easier. Adults can also relate what a child is learning in school to the museum visit. The child can use the visit to do research or to find out more about a subject currently being studied.181
To make a family visit more enjoyable, the family programming staff at the Art Institute suggests that adults should prepare a small activity bag for use inside the museum. It can include a notebook for the children to use for sketching, writing stories, or writing down questions that families cannot answer right away; the family guide and floorplan of the museum; and a favorite toy to occupy the hands of a child who feels the need to touch something while looking at objects.\textsuperscript{182}

The Art Institute's website suggests that once the family arrives at the museum, the information desk should be visited first to discover the location of restrooms and elevators, and what special events are available for that particular day. The Art Institute provides strollers free of charge and all restrooms are equipped with changing tables and drinking fountains. The women's restroom in the lower level of the museum has a nursing area. These conveniences can make a family visit much more comfortable.\textsuperscript{183}

The Art Institute is careful to advise adults to allow their children to enjoy the galleries at their own pace. This flexibility allows a significant adult to determine what their children's interests are and how well they understand the information they are absorbing. The Art Institute also dispels the myth that people should whisper in the galleries. The museum encourages families to discuss the works that they visit. The museum lists specific suggestions for initiating discussions with children similar to those made in chapter 3 of this thesis.\textsuperscript{184}

The Art Institute of Chicago suggests that families visit the galleries for "child-sized" periods of time.\textsuperscript{185} Adults do not need to feel pressured to see everything in one visit. Families should stay only as long as the child is engaged. Young children, especially preschoolers and those in primary grades, usually learn best in brief sessions
and can be overwhelmed by seeing too many things at one time. Thirty minutes to one hour in the galleries may be the limit. Families should remember that a meaningful experience with a few works of art is more valuable than a grand tour. The Kraft Education Center at the Art Institute of Chicago is supplied with over 1000 picture books, an interactive art gallery for children, and family gallery games. A visit to this center may serve as a good break for children before going back into the galleries.

Families can look for opportunities to continue learning after the visit. The Art Institute’s website suggests that adults ask the children to describe their museum visit to friends and relatives, to reinforce the learning experience. The site prompts significant adults to ask other questions of their children. What was their favorite work of art? What didn’t they like? Why? The Art Institute suggests that adults can help children relate what they saw in the museum to daily life. It recommends that adults discuss with their children how works of art, posters, and objects in the home are similar to the things that were seen at the museum.186

Families can find answers to unsolved questions together. To encourage children to maintain an active interest in art and the museum, the Art Institute has developed Ask Artie, a website. Children can send questions related to the museum or a particular work of art to Artie, the lion, who will answer them. One question and answer will be posted each month on the Ask Artie page so that children will be able to see what other students are curious about.187

Getty Museum

The Getty Museum, located in Los Angeles, has one of the largest annual endowments of any museum in the United States. The accommodations provided for
family learning at the museum reflect this. The Family Room, located in the Museum Courtyard near the East Pavilion, is the central location for planning an exciting museum experience. The Family Room is suggested for adults with children ages 5 to 13. To start their visit, families can pick up materials and games to use in the galleries so that they may enjoy hands-on activities together. Children can discover the clues that artists use to create portraits of people from different cultures and periods of time. By trying on costumes and posing in front of backdrops that match real works of art in the collection, children can relate to people who lived in different periods of time. The Family Room also has a reading corner and an online search engine, ArtAccess, which is an interactive multimedia resource to help families find information about art at the Getty. All materials in the Family Room are available in both English and Spanish. The room is always staffed by a docent who can help families plan what to do during their visit.\textsuperscript{188}

Some of the games available for borrowing from the Family Room include "Perplexing Paintings," a game box that leads families through the collection. Families can also borrow Art Kits, which are filled with crayons, markers, colored pencils, and oil pastels for sketching in the garden area. Families can also take a treasure hunt through the galleries with "The Getty Art Detective," where a list of objects depicted in the paintings become the source of the hunt.\textsuperscript{189}

The family audioguide has special stops with activities created just for families. Stories, fun facts, and questions about art that can be discussed together. There is a rental fee of $3 for each headset.\textsuperscript{190}

To avoid museum fatigue, the Getty suggests that families alternate time spent in the gallery with drawing in the gardens, playing in the Family Room, and looking for
information in the four Art Information Rooms. Like many other museums, the Getty suggests that families look at the art in just one or two galleries at a time, then try an activity before coming back to see more art.  

The Getty Museum understands that many children are picky eaters. Their café offers family-friendly food like pizza and sandwiches. Families are also encouraged to bring their own lunches to enjoy in the courtyards.

Strollers and wheelchairs are available at no charge at the lower tram station and at the coat check in the Museum Entrance Hall. The family restroom, located in the South Pavilion of the Museum includes a breast-feeding station and private facilities in which adults can assist a companion.

The Hirshhorn Museum, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Getty Museum all have exemplary models of family programming. While each museum has its own specialties to interest families, they share common traits. For example, all three programs offer families a packet of games or a guide that will assist them in enjoying the galleries at their own pace. In large part, all of the special family activities are free or are offered at reduced prices. These museums understand the importance of catering to family audiences and helping them understand art in a way that is accessible to all members of that social unit.
Chapter 6

Conclusions and the Future of Family Programming

As chapters four and five of this thesis have illustrated, museums are becoming better prepared to welcome family groups. Falk and Dierking note that special programming, reduced fees, and family accessible areas have helped museums increase the number of families they serve.¹⁹⁴ With this success, how will museums continue to improve family programming?

Strengths and Weaknesses

Falk and Dierking evaluate the future of museums relative to existing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within the museum field.¹⁹⁵ They credit the tourism industry as a significant contributor to the current success of museums.¹⁹⁶ The museums are benefiting not only from increased visitor numbers, but also from a system of positive feedback cycles. They also claim that the cycle begins with guests visiting the museum. If the guests have an enjoyable experience, they will likely tell their friends to visit. The positive word of mouth eventually makes the museum a popular destination. Falk and Dierking also note that popularity generally results in good press, which in turn encourages more guests to visit the museum. The resulting success reinforces the cycle.¹⁹⁷

Families are an important construct for the positive feedback cycle. As noted in chapter 4 of this thesis, families constitute a significant percentage of visitors to museums each year. Falk and Dierking attribute some of the success of museums to the creation of websites as a source of information.¹⁹⁸ As seen through the success of the family
programming at the Art Institute of Chicago, described in chapter 5, some families are comfortable utilizing museum websites to aid in planning a visit, or to gather information about certain objects of interest.

According to these researchers, one of the greatest strengths of the museum, is also its greatest weakness: once a museum has achieved popularity among the community and with traveling visitors, it must sustain its success. Falk and Dierking also note that when families come to the museum they expect it to be a place that offers consistent high-quality learning opportunities, maintains intellectual integrity, and provides a source of entertainment.

Opportunities and Challenges

Museums have a great opportunity and responsibility to welcome diverse audiences. Falk and Dierking note that over the last ten years, museums have made an effort to broaden their collections to include the contributions of “historically underrepresented populations,” including African Americans, Asians, Latinos, and Native Americans. The future of family programming also rests on the construction of exhibition labels and activity packets written in languages understood by the visiting public, in addition to English, as suggested by Talboys. According to Falk and Dierking, museums must also strengthen programming related to senior citizens, as they are also an underrepresented group.

Falk and Dierking also assert that the greatest challenge facing museums is economic. They worry that the public will not discriminate between museums that provide their services at a low cost or for donations and a potentially new breed of for-profit museums, sponsored by large corporations. Will audiences be drawn in by an
atmosphere that is more like a theme or discovery park where technology is widely used for each exhibit? Falk and Dierking also stipulate that the internet poses a challenge to museums. Will the public ever replace a museum visit with an online exploration of ancient civilizations and objects?

According to Falk and Dierking, with the current success of the museum industry and the variety of objects displayed, museums will continue to be a place utilized by families for free-choice learning. As this thesis demonstrates, family programming in museums offer a variety of ways for families to explore art together in a safe environment for social learning. There are many rich programs available to families, but these opportunities for learning may be disregarded by adults who assume that they must have a thorough understanding of art before visiting a museum with their child. Museums have the obligation to not only create and advertise family programs, but to present the information in such a way that adults understand that they will not be alone in trying to help their children enjoy the museum experience. Whether a family chooses to participate in a guided or unguided visit, there are learning resources available for adults and children. To best serve a family audience, museum publicity materials need to make it unmistakably clear that a museum is an accessible forum for family entertainment and learning.
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