

# Museums, Families & Communities: Being of Value

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"Ideally during childhood people develop a foundation for lifelong learning and family members play a vital role in helping children develop a joy for learning and an understanding that learning is a process, something that all children *and* adults do, all their lives."

-- From *Lessons Without Limit; How Free-Choice Learning is Transforming Education*

# Overview of Talk

- Situate family learning in the arena of free-choice learning
- Discuss family learning: its importance, what approaches work, etc.
- Suggest ways for museums & libraries to be resources for families' free-choice learning, some of the outcomes observed & three cases

# Framing Learning Broadly

- We live in a Learning Society
- Learning is 24 - 7 - 52 - 80+
- Learning is rapidly becoming the number one industry and the number one leisure activity

# Free-Choice Learning

- Most of what we learn, we learn through free-choice learning, learning that is guided by a person's needs and interests
- People engage in free-choice learning throughout their lives to find out more about what they find useful, compelling or just plain interesting

# What is Family Learning?

- Special form of lifelong free-choice learning; families talk, interact & reinforce social history & identity
- Family members share experiences, background & knowledge
- Understand each other's learning styles, strengths & weaknesses
- Some families use museums & libraries regularly, but not all

# Why is It Important?

- First & foremost learning institution
- Constitutes largest percentage of visitors
- What happens in home & community is critical to a person's success
- Visiting museums as child with one's family correlates with adult use; not sure about library data but would think similar

# What Does It Look Like?

- Experience begins long before family arrives & continues long after
- Occurs within contexts family finds appropriate & engaging
- Involves social interaction
- Families talk, collaborate & construct *own* experience
- In doing so, make meaning by working & solving problems together



# Theoretical Underpinnings

- Socio-cultural; learning constructed & shared within socio-cultural & physical contexts
- Learning at most basic level is identity-building
- Families use museums to shape/enact their identity; it's about them-not us!!
- Families bring their own S-C context & interact with ours



# Things to consider about families

- Race-ethnicity, language preference, cultural background, socioeconomic status & education level
- Size of family & composition—who & how relate to one another
- Ages of child(ren)
- Experience with free-choice/informal institutions in general & yours specifically

# Things to consider about families

- Knowledge, beliefs, & attitudes about a museum's role in learning, as well as their roles as "learners"
- Knowledge, beliefs, & attitudes about the content in general & any specific topic/in the case of libraries, reading and books
- If regular visitor, prior experience with activity &/or facilitator

# Big Ideas about Family Learning

- “It’s about them, stupid!” --families are learning communities; they arrive with resources, agendas, interests, expectations & identities
- Museums & libraries are rich physical, social-cultural settings; some families know how to “museum” / “library” but not all
- Enjoyable & fun—laughing & learning; looks different from family to family

# Important Roles for Museums

Nation's 123,000 libraries & 17,500 museums are:

- **Community anchors**
  - Safe & accessible civic spaces promoting lifelong learning, cultural enrichment, & civic engagement, especially for vulnerable families & children
- **Connectors**
  - Bridge generations & bring children & families together in fun & non-threatening settings that can build mutual knowledge, skills, & self-efficacy

- **Innovative learning specialists**

- create “teachable moments” through exhibits, outreach programs, & environments that invite hands-on experiential learning.

- **Digital hubs**

- provide guidance for navigating new technologies & identify trusted online resources to help close the digital divide for children, families & caregivers

- **Stewards of cultural, scientific, historical & environmental heritages**

- Offer collections of resources appealing to all disciplines and levels of learners

# Family Learning Outcomes for Adults

- Enriched perception of importance of supporting child's (& own!) learning
- Increased awareness & appreciation for child's (& own!) interest, curiosity & creativity
- Enhanced sense of value of time together
- Boosted adults' confidence, interest & understanding about how to support the learning of their child (& own!)

# Family Place Libraries—Focus on whole child & role of parents



# USS Constitution Museum—Engaging in history through games & role playing





1897-1997  
The exhibition, Boston

1931-1934  
National Cruise

1940  
August 26: Named  
symbolic flagship  
of U.S. fleet

1947  
150th birthday

1954  
July 23: Boston  
designated as  
homeport

1973-1976  
Restoration

1977  
birthday

SEAMAN

OFFICER

OFFICER

NO 15-17

- 1. Roll the dice
- 2. Move a seaman with any result
- 3. Advance an officer
- 4. Draw a card (if rolled 6 or 12)
- 5. See who is being shot!
- 6. If you are hit, you are out!
- 7. If you are hit, you are out!



# Denver Art Museum—Engaging families actively in art-making



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