



# Engage Families

**A GUIDE TO FAMILY  
ENGAGEMENT IN EXHIBITS  
AND PROGRAMS**

*USS Constitution Museum | Boston, MA*

Looking to create exhibits and programs that actively engage all members of the family audience?

## **This guide is for you.**

Backed by proven strategies from the USS Constitution Museum's family learning initiative and inspired by the seminal research of project advisors Lynn Dierking and Minda Borun, this guide offers a robust yet flexible framework for engaging multi-generational audiences in exhibits and programs.

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Further information and resources available at  
**[usscm.org/engagefamilies](http://usscm.org/engagefamilies)**

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USS  
Constitution  
Museum

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# WHY ENGAGE FAMILIES?

Engaging families in exhibits and programs has important benefits for the families and the institutions offering these experiences.

## Engaging families supports . . .

### FAMILY LEARNING

Families are the first and most important learning community that a person experiences. Social interaction, collaboration, and sharing among family members are key to the family learning process.<sup>1</sup>

### FAMILY INTERACTION

Family-friendly experiences encourage families to build connections, make memories, and learn about each other.

### INSTITUTIONS

When families are engaged, they stay longer and leave happier. They are even more likely to donate and return.

## What does family engagement look like in exhibits and programs?

- All ages are actively participating in the experience
- Everyone feels there is something for him or her
- Intergenerational conversations are taking place
- Adults and children are learning together
- It is an enjoyable, collaborative, social experience

<sup>1</sup> Lynn Dierking, "Laughing and Learning Together: What is Family Learning?," USS Constitution Museum, [ussconstitutionmuseum.org/engagefamilies](https://ussconstitutionmuseum.org/engagefamilies).



# FAMILY-FRIENDLY CONTENT

To spark family interest and engagement in your content, consider these approaches.

## Less is more

Families want simplicity and clarity. Reduce content to its most important essence.

### TRY IT

- Use fifty-word text panels; it's a great exercise in getting to the point
- Use graphs, charts, objects, graphics, and interactives to reduce dependency on words
- Layer information

## Make connections

Families are more likely to remember and make meaning of content they can relate to.

### TRY IT

- Tell the story through people to foster personal connections
- Use first-person voice to enliven the delivery
- Pose questions that bring families into the story
- Connect the content to families' lives

## Lighten up

Family-friendly content doesn't mean dumbing down. Families want authenticity and accuracy. They just don't want it to feel like work.

### TRY IT

- Find the fun in the story you are telling
- Play with word choice (i.e. "buddy" instead of "friend")
- Communicate in an easy, conversational manner





Age Sailor

How tall are you?  
How old are you?  
What value are you worth?  
What color is your hair?  
Are you African American?  
Do you have any tattoos?

# DESIGN STRATEGIES

How can we design exhibits and programs that engage all ages? Let these design principles be your guide.

## 01 Multi-User\*

Families are looking for experiences that they can share together. Multi-user experiences allow for several sets of hands and bodies to participate at the same time. Designing exhibits and programs with opportunities for all family members to actively participate together encourages family communication and collaboration.

### TRY IT

- Develop experiences that require family members to work together
- Assign everyone a part to play in a program
- Provide materials suited for both adults and children



## 02 Multi-Sided\*

Multi-sided experiences allow families to physically gather around an exhibit element or program activity. This encourages family members to interact in ways that promote conversation and learning.

### TRY IT

- Dedicate more exhibit space to multi-sided experiences so families can engage together
- Design opportunities for families to face each other
- Get facilitators out from behind a table so they can move around and encourage family interaction

## 03 Multi-Modal\*

Multi-modal experiences offer different ways of interacting with content. Delivering content through a variety of methods and formats produces a more dynamic experience where there's something for everyone.

### TRY IT

- Incorporate the senses
- Find opportunities for full-body activities and hands-on exploration
- Integrate images and objects
- Serve different learning styles





# DESIGN STRATEGIES

## 04

### Encourage Conversation

Conversation is key to family learning.<sup>1</sup> Family conversation leads to shared understanding of the exhibit or program's subject matter and provides families with the opportunity to learn about their family and each other.

#### TRY IT

- Pose open-ended questions in your text panels, program delivery, or on a comment board
- Build in choice and group challenges that require families to problem-solve and make decisions together
- Integrate humor and the element of surprise



## 05

### Multi-Outcome\*

Exhibits and programs that end differently based on participants' choices and actions are multi-outcome. Building this into experiences supports family conversation, agency, bonding, and learning.

#### TRY IT

- Design collaborative challenges
- Encourage free-choice exploration
- Design a game

## 06

### Authentic and Distinctive

Families value authentic and distinctive content, materials, environments, and activities. Experiences that they can't get elsewhere are especially meaningful.

#### TRY IT

- Incorporate real and genuine objects, methods, and materials
- Use quotes and authentic language
- Stand out from the crowd by finding your institution's special twist

## 07

### Relevant\*

Relevant experiences help families make connections between exhibit content or program activities and their own lives. Research shows that when people can connect to a concept on both an intellectual and emotional level, they are more likely to engage with it, remember it, and learn from it.<sup>2</sup>

#### TRY IT

- Draw connections to everyday life, timely topics in the news, holidays, broad themes, and universal experiences
- Incorporate reflective questions
- Tell the story through individuals of the past so families can connect on a personal level

## 08

### Accessible\*

Families represent a range of ages, abilities, and interests. Develop experiences that meet families where they are, have something for everyone, and are sensitive to their needs. This encourages all members to participate fully in a way that feels safe and comfortable to them.

#### TRY IT

- Build flexibility and choice into programs
- Empower facilitators to adapt as they see fit to meet individual needs
- Offer seating
- Be mindful of the height of interactions and the weight and size of materials used



## 09

### Fun and Play

Families want to have fun. Fun and play in programs and exhibits encourages families to laugh and learn together. When families are having fun, they are more receptive to learning.

#### TRY IT

- Create a judgement-free zone that encourages play
- Integrate competition and games
- Incorporate the element of surprise

\* These concepts were identified by the Philadelphia-Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC) through a National Science Foundation research study on the characteristics of family-friendly exhibits in informal science learning environments. [Borun, Minda, et al. *Family Learning in Museums: The PISEC Perspective*. Philadelphia: Philadelphia/Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC), The Franklin Institute, 1998.]

The USS Constitution Museum tested these concepts in its own exhibits and programs through an Institute of Museum and Library Services-funded National Leadership Grant. The Museum further identified the principles of Encourage Conversation, Authentic and Distinctive, and Fun and Play as key design characteristics.

<sup>1</sup> Developed in conversation with Minda Borun of The Franklin Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Munley, Mary Ellen. *Early Learning in Museums: A Review of Literature*. MEM & Associates and Smithsonian Institution's Early Learning Collaborative Network, April 12, 2012.

# PROGRAM FACILITATION

Keep these tips in mind when facilitating a family program.

## Thank families for attending

- It takes a lot for families to get there. Let them know you're glad they've come.

## Invite all to participate

- Use phrases like: "for everyone," "the entire family," "for all ages," "work together as a team"
- Make eye contact with both adults and children
- Don't forget to actively and continually engage adults

## Honor each family

- Every family is different. Respect family agency and dynamics.

## Prompt conversation

- Be the "guide on the side," not the "sage on the stage"
- Ask questions of all members of the family, not just the children
- Provide opportunities for reflection

## Be flexible

- Be prepared to adjust program set-up, design, or length to meet the individual needs of families.

## Have fun

- Smile, use humor, and be playful. This encourages families to laugh and learn together.





# TEST AND EVALUATE

Make families a partner in the exhibit and program development process by including them every step of the way.

## 01 Get early feedback

Go to families with your initial ideas. Ask them what they think. This can be in the form of a quick survey or a more formal focus group.

## 02 Prototype

Draft. Test. Modify. Repeat. The iterative prototyping process will test:

- **Functionality** — Will it work?
- **Clarity** — Do families understand what interactions are expected?
- **Comprehension** — Do families understand the key idea or story?
- **Interest** — Do families want to engage?

To gain an overall feel for families' satisfaction, it can be helpful to ask them to rate the experience like a movie with a five-star scale. Try modifying until you reach an average of four-and-a-half stars. You may not get there. Be willing to let go of a favorite idea.

## 03 Measure success

Ask families for their feedback on the final product. What did they learn? Observe families engaging in the experience. How long are they staying? Are they having conversations? Where do families talk and laugh the most? What did you learn from the development process that can inform your next exhibit or program?





Ready to engage all ages in  
exhibits and programs?

**This guide is just the beginning.**

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**DIVE DEEPER AND LEARN MORE AT**  
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