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In Partnership with Children: Experience Planning



MUSEUM NOTES

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With a strong interest in welcoming, focusing on, and serving visitors, museums describe themselves as visitor centered. Children's museums also focus on their visitors. In particular, they give particular attention to children whose well-being and learning are at the center of these museums' own long-term, strategic interests. Children, rather than content, are the reason for children's museums. In fact, they are both the core audience and the primary explorers of the experiences children's museums create.

Centering on children is also evident in children's museums' visions, missions, and values. Vision statements often envision a promising future with expanding opportunities for children. Missions focus on the critical role of play in children's development, sparking a delight in learning, and nurturing their unfolding creative potential. Values such as the critical role of play and childhood, early learners becoming lifelong learners, and the supportive relationships of parents and caregivers guide these museums.

Intentions are not achievement, however. While a strong and aligned set of beliefs and aspirations is critical, it is only a start in keeping children at the center of a museum's work. Centering is not guaranteed; competition for an organization's time, attention, and resources is constant. Everything wants to be at the center: safety; subject matter; play; resilience; sustainability; architecture. If the priority is keeping children at the heart of the museum, we must think often, hard, and in new ways about how to do it.

How can children's museums act on their visions and values to create remarkable experiences of enduring value for children and become recognized anchors in their communities across generations?

They can work in partnership with children.

In Partnership with Children

A long-term, active, and respectful relationship between a museum, its staff, trustees, and volunteers, and children connects beliefs with behaviors. Actually a mindset, being in partnership with children permeates how we view children, work in new ways, and see ourselves as learners.

Typically, museums form partnerships with organizations around relatively near-term objectives for a project, to extend audience reach, or access expertise. While children do participate in museum projects as

an invited audience group, their participation is typically short-term and structured around a specific activity. They are unlikely to be viewed as long-term partners or having relevant expertise for the experiences created for them.

Generally, children's participation in developing the exhibits and programs we produce for them is limited. When considered at all, their involvement is often a single activity or workshop, something a team schedules and carries out to gather children's input on preferences, what they like, or icons of popular culture they recognize. Planning team members ask some questions, check the core curriculum, and move through the established experience-planning process, prototyping along the way, ticking off steps, and tucking bits gleaned from children into the final design.



Project:
Minnesota Children's Museum

This is neither a partnership nor an expression of great respect for children's capabilities to contribute to the opportunities we create for them, in fact, the very opportunities we want them to enjoy at our museums. Consequently, we don't benefit from children's insights, expertise, and ideas for shaping varied experiences and opportunities we offer them, their families, caregivers, and teachers. We simply don't ask them. Ironically, while our goal is to engage children in learning experiences in finished exhibits and galleries, we keep them from the learning opportunities in planning: telling us about themselves, what is fascinating to them, what they wonder about, where they see connections between ideas.

While we may say we plan with children in mind, we fail to add the critical perspective of the end user. Without children's first-hand information, we create experiences grounded in adult assumptions and expectations about them. Understanding what children like, how they construct knowledge, or what is humorous to them comes through an adult lens, if it comes through at all.

Seeing Children

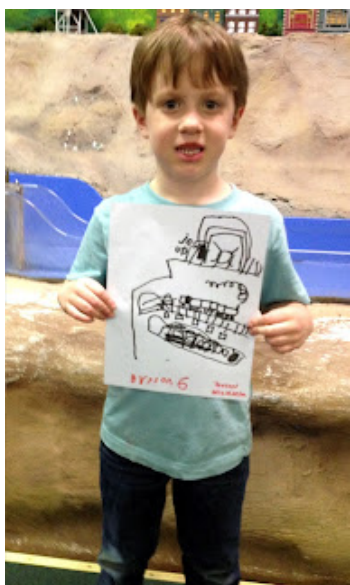
Whether we are parents, caregivers, teachers, or museum staff, we each carry an **image of the child** which invisibly directs us as we approach, talk to, listen to, and design for them. At the core of our partnership with children is our view of them. Is it the capable child or the needy child? If we see children as needing help and we focus on what they can't (yet) do, we overlook their competence and what they are capable of contributing to our understanding and to their exhibit experience. If, on the other hand, we see them as resourceful, capable of making choices using many modalities to express their ideas, children become co-constructors of experiences with us.



Project: Explore & More Children's Museum
Buffalo, NY

Shifting to a mindset of the child as rich in ideas and potential, strong in spirit, and an active agent in their own learning moves our thinking and informs our work. We begin to assume children have something valuable to contribute which, in turn, suggests questions to explore, ways to engage them, and generates new insights.

When children are valued partners, competent and full of potential, we view them as actors and active agents with us. They are subjects who think and create, not objects to be studied, managed, or directed to do what we already had in mind. Children are, in fact, sources of information and expertise that is otherwise unavailable to us. Together with them we can investigate our questions and theirs about how they understand a corner of the world in an exhibit in ways that help expand opportunities for them to explore, discover, and learn.



Project: Hands On Discovery Center
Johnson City, TN

We ask different questions of children when we have a strong, positive image of them. We interact differently with them. Rather than asking, *do you like this or that*, making up a sorting exercise, or evaluating their knowledge, we shape questions to deepen our understanding of what children wonder about and care about. We follow what they notice and where that noticing takes them. We look into what they think is happening when waves crash, bubbles burst, or fish sleep. At the same time, they are having real-world experiences, exploring, sharing, and understanding their interests, choices, and identities.

Working in New Ways

After decades of planning experiences *for* children rather than *with* them, bringing them into an established experience planning process seems challenging. In fact, partnering with children builds on existing processes and practices. It engages with a museum-led process to create museum-identified experiences such as an exhibit, placemaking, an initiative, or even a building. Grounded in a practice of inquiry, partnering with children adds their points of view to the diverse perspectives of educators, developers, designers, researchers

and evaluators thinking together. From preplanning to opening, every phase of the process includes children in meaningful ways that build on their strengths. Using varied strategies, such as drawing, writing, materials exploration, and discussion, children become co-researchers with designers, developers, and educators in creating an exhibit.

What this approach adds to a typical exhibit planning process is an on-going dialogue between the museum's team and the children it wants to serve, sometimes involving and learning from parents as well. The team follows its charge from the museum to explore a topic or question and develop an exhibit. It is not looking to children to decide the direction, content, or design.

Team interest in and curiosity about children's thinking and ideas, along with a spirit of openness informs how it involves them in a question-powered process supported by inquiry, reflection, documentation; by interpreting and revisiting their words, drawings, and constructions. And finding new meaning there.

Team-created openings bring children into the process to help shape the exhibit, its approach, context, experiences, and activities. Often framed around overarching questions, children's involvement allows them to share what is interesting and important in their daily lives.



Children's exploration of materials, conversations, choices, and expressions of their feelings allow the team to glimpse and appreciate their agency, curiosity, imagination, and funds of knowledge.

Source: American University

Observation of children's natural exploration and learning strategies along with their own spoken, written, and visual contributions gathered from conversations, workshops, and physical explorations inform and inspire the team throughout its work. A team may consider drawings, narratives, discussions, photos, asking *what are we seeing here? what does this tell us about how children understand this? what is behind these words or inside this drawing?* Every contribution, response, new question, and idea children offer in this exchange deserves thoughtful consideration, although not every idea must be used.

The team selects the most intriguing and relevant traces of children to reflect on and to follow their connections in an effort to better understand them, expand its perspective, and further its own explorations. The team might find a new question, revisit and revise previous assumptions, or encounter possibilities it hadn't thought of before. In the process, a team and its members begin to see alternative ways of working with children and folding in their views. Teams discover what children know about their world and how that might inform the exhibit context and activities.



Source: Internet

Children's drawings, words, photos, or constructions become part of the give-and-take of creating a new exhibit, gallery, or maker space. Their insights help push the team's thinking and ideas beyond what it thinks it knows. That shove might push a team somewhere it hadn't planned to go; drive new possibilities of experiences; surface a valuable starting point for a future project. Or simply make environments, exhibits, and experiences better.

A partnership with children is about *wanting* to work with children to offer experiences that engage, support, and extend their capabilities. Over time, this work produces a set of supportive practices and resources that can be adapted to new questions, other projects, and different groups of children. Traces of children's thinking and ideas emerging from a project help document the process and insights it generated. Project-by-project the museum grows a set of resources and builds new knowledge about children. In giving visibility to children's skills, strategies and competence; to

their play, exploration, and learning, it instills pride in children. Through its partnership with children, the museum is living its vision, mission, and values.

Seeing Ourselves as Learners

Not only does an active, respectful partnership with children change how we see them as thinkers and learners, but it also has the potential to change how we see ourselves as thinkers and learners. The varied work involved in creating environments, exhibits, and programs with children is capable of transforming work responsibilities and daily tasks into professional growth and development for exhibit developers, designers, program planners, researchers and evaluators.

We all learn. We **learn as individuals and as groups**. Sometimes we are more intentional about learning than others. The rich, layered, interactive experience-planning process concerned with creating possibilities for play, exploration, and learning depends on multiple perspectives and varied sources of information. It brings together concept, content and context. Every step along the way is an opportunity for learning, both intentional and incidental.

Through a steady practice of inquiry, observation, and reflection, teams investigate questions, find connections, and discover how to extend exploration. Teams and their members innovate, adapt, and learn, changing how they work over time. Typically, the nature and quality of questions change. Simple questions such as, *what do children like?* evolve into polished questions such as *what moves children to a place of wonder?* A single question is recast as a set of sub questions capable of guiding research, thinking, children's contributions, and documentation. New ways to explore these questions emerge; new ways to glimpse meaning in children's work surface.

Along the way, the team develops a shared vocabulary of words, concepts, and practices. Focusing on children's thinking and learning builds awareness of individuals' own thinking and learning and moves the team's thinking. Discussions become richer and more productive.

In this territory, teams are often working at the nexus of theory and practice, between theoretical knowledge and what is understood from observing children in exhibits. While learning theories are not the usual background of designers and fabricators, how children and adults play, learn, and think is always at the core of the experiences children's museum teams create for visitors. Over time, teams deepen and extend their understanding of the nature of learning by sharing and reading blogs, articles, journals, and books.

Creating experiences with children represents a museum's long-term value of and investment in people—children and staff. This on-going work represents an interest in creating opportunities that are responsive to and engage children's capabilities and potentials as well as growing and supporting staff in their work. In the process the museum cultivates an organizational culture that is interested in, alert to, and nurtures its staff's outstanding capacities.



Project: Louisiana Children's Museum