

Frist Center for the Visual Arts Family Learning in Interactive Galleries Research Project Case Study Summary

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Who are the families?

The six families in the Frist Center for the Visual Arts case study sample were selected because they were frequent visitors to the Center and to the Martin ArtQuest interactive gallery. Many families in the Frist case study group began visiting when their children were infants in strollers. Parents seized the opportunity to see the exhibitions and feed their personal interest in the arts. As the children became more mobile, the focus of the visit began to shift towards the child's

interests and needs. One Nashville native said she first went to the Frist Center because it was “big news” and she was sure it would be a “positive influence in the community.” She also recalled that after their first visit to the museum that day, she “knew that the Frist would be part of her daughter’s life, but didn’t realize it would be AS big a part of her life as it has been.”

For families with toddlers and early elementary-age children, Martin ArtQuest became a primary focus of the visit. Families began to cycle back into the exhibition galleries as their children grew older and could understand the behavioral expectations in art exhibitions. One mother said she did not grow up in an arts-friendly home and neither she nor her husband were knowledgeable about art. However, both agreed that the arts were important for their children. They rely on the Frist to assist them in achieving that family goal. “It gives the children an opportunity to do things and to understand areas of art that I have basically no knowledge of. We cannot just do those things at home because I do not understand it and for them to be in a room where they see many different ways to do art and being able to participate in that is great.” Half of the Frist Center families in this study home-school their children. Consequently, the Frist Center and, particularly Martin ArtQuest, were important teaching and learning resources for these families.

Fathers in the case study families engaged in a variety of professions including a practicing artist, writer, college lecturer, researcher, and computer programmer.

None of the mothers held fulltime jobs outside of the home and four of the six mothers were home-schooling their children during the case study research period. Whether or not families home-schooled was not one of the criteria for selection into the study so it is unusual that over half of these families did home-school their children.¹ Several mothers reported interest in art, sometimes creating art themselves, including photography, painting and drawing, interior design, and arts and crafts.

Some fathers never accompanied the family to the Frist Center during this study, attributing their non-participation to work commitments. When fathers did not attend, the children sometimes talked enthusiastically about how they would share the content of their experience through conversations at home. Fathers did attend the accompanied visits to the museum and the like-sites occasionally. In those cases, the mothers felt the presence of the fathers was important in illustrating to the children that going to the Frist was a valuable experience for everyone. In two families, however, the fathers initiated the visit and attended every time because they held a strong personal commitment to the value of art in their families' quality of life. As one father explained, "ArtQuest provided an easy way to visit with my daughter and do something that I feel is good for her and her mind to build her appreciation of beauty. I think that beauty and the appreciation of beauty is an essential part of being happy."

What do families do in the Frist Center for the Visual Arts?

Most of the accompanied visits to the Frist Center included the mother and child or children. On average, families in this study spent an average of two hours on each visit. This was also the average length of visit to the accompanied like-sites visits. The average, however, tends to flatten out the range. The shortest visit lasted just over one hour while the longest visit lasted just under three hours. Time was usually split evenly between viewing art in the exhibition galleries and creating and viewing art in the Martin ArtQuest. One family spent their time exclusively in Martin ArtQuest, explaining that with four children of different ages, the variety of activities served everyone's different needs. One of the home-school families frequently met other home-school families at the Frist Center and like-sites. This parent reflected that the children enjoyed socializing with each other and the mothers appreciated having adult-to-adult interactions. The desire for socialization centers around enjoyment and practicing social skills. With older children, parents tend to give their children more "space" and greater autonomy with the art materials and in social interactions. Martin ArtQuest affords flexibility on this continuum of parental engagement.

Frist Center Exhibitions

Parents employed a variety of strategies when they take children into the exhibition galleries. Some families stayed together for all or most of their time in the

¹ State and city statistics on the number and percentage of children being home schooled are difficult to determine as states vary in their reporting requirements for home-schooled children. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that home-schooled children increased from 1.7% in 1999 to 2.9% in 2007. <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=91>

exhibitions, while other families engaged in a kind of “boomerang” pattern, moving away on their own or in pairs and coming back together. Some parents came with a general agenda, e.g. the “mommy rule” to view the exhibitions prior to art-making activities, to add artworks to the child’s portfolio, or to make connections with school and home-school subjects.

Most of the time, a parent or a child read wall text out loud and parents guided a discussion of how the label information connected to the artwork. One family, where the father was a practicing artist, rarely read the wall text. Rather each family member spent time carefully observing the art followed by a discussion. One family with four children between the ages of 6 and 12 did not visit the exhibitions galleries during any of the accompanied visits. As the younger children mature, this mother intends to spend more time in the exhibitions as a family. She found that attending the Kids Club program and Martin ArtQuest for about two hours each visit best satisfied all the children’s needs.

Figure 1 illustrates a “word-cloud” of the learning behaviors observed in the case study families while visiting the exhibitions at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts. Unsurprisingly, the most frequent learning behavior was looking at art, followed by explaining, identifying, and evaluating the features or merit of an artwork. Other strong trends in the analysis of learning behaviors included reading wall text, describing and interpreting the art.



Martin ArtQuest

The manner in which families moved through the interactive gallery appeared to be influenced by the number of children in the group. In families of two or more children, particularly those with older children, parents tended towards a more “hands-off” approach of careful non-interference. Despite this hands-off approach, these parents remained available to answer questions, help out, and offer encouragement when their children needed it. In these families, the children most often bounced around to most of the stations, settling at their favorites for longer time periods. Parents enjoyed watching how their children interacted with other

children, Frist Center staff, and the activities. As one mother explained, “Martin ArtQuest helps me to get to know my children... I see what they enjoy.”

Families with one child tended to stay together in the interactive gallery. Sometimes these families engaged in a type of “parallel play” with each family member engaged in their own activity, particularly at the art-making stations. The degree to which they read and followed instructions tended to depend on individual personalities. Some parents and children ignored the instructions, preferring to explore and create on their own. Other parents and children found the instructions necessary, comforting and enjoyable. An interesting tension sometimes developed between an instruction-follower and a non-instruction-follower in the same family. They always worked it out or, at least, tolerated the other’s differences.

Most families visited the Martin ArtQuest at the end of their visit, spending about half of their allotted time for the whole visit in the interactive space. A few families went to the interactive gallery in the middle of their visit, sometimes starting with the exhibitions, then engaging in ArtQuest, then heading back into the exhibitions or attending the Kids Club programs. A few visits were just to Martin ArtQuest. None of the families visited the interactive space first and none visited only the exhibitions.



Figure 2: Learning Behaviors in Martin ArtQuest at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts

The learning behavior that families exhibited most frequently in Martin ArtQuest was “design.” (See Figure 2) This finding is expected since the interactive experience has multiple opportunities to create and design. Families also evaluated the experience they were having in ArtQuest, but more often, evaluated aspects of their own creations. Parents and children described and explained what they were doing, proposed possible approaches or design solutions, reflected on their own process, watched how other people within and outside of their immediate family group used the space, and were liberal in the ways they provided each other with abundant positive reinforcement for their creative efforts.

What Other Leisure Learning Choices do Families Make?



The Frist Center families in this study reported having a wide range of leisure choices. The families, in general, valued outdoor activities, particularly in good weather, because of the physical exercise and the sense of calm that results after outdoor exercise. Outdoor activities included nature walks and hiking, camping, going to parks, youth sports practices and games. These families also visited other art museums, history museums, science centers, and zoos quite frequently.

Home-school families reported a wide range of family destinations because these families tended to use the cultural resources in the community quite regularly as schooling experiences. These families emphasized learning on their outings—for the children and adults. One home-schooling mother talked about how she created pre- and post-visit research activities. Learning was also important for the two non-home-school families but they tended focus a bit more on enjoyment and expressing or reinforcing family values during their outings, including cultivating an aesthetic sensibility.

How do Families Value the Martin ArtQuest?

For most parents, the value of the Martin ArtQuest was that it provided a much-needed respite for the whole family after their visit to the exhibitions. Parents described the space as relaxing, a place where both children and adults can “unwind.” Many parents noted that the interactive gallery served as a kind of “carrot,” enabling them to coax their children to spend time in the exhibitions with the promise of the Martin ArtQuest gallery as a reward. Parents and children described the experience as fun, safe, and familiar, a place where people had a sense of freedom to do things a bit out of the ordinary for a typical art museum visit. The specialness of the experience included personalized interactions with Martin ArtQuest staff.

Martin ArtQuest was valued by families because it offered them something that everyone in the family could enjoy at the same time. It was another way these families could create memories that served to bond them as a family unit. At the same time, the interactive gallery experience was considered unique. It was something they either could not do elsewhere or, in the case of complicated and messy art making activities, would not likely do at home.



Another value of the space for most families was the creative, sensory nature of the experience. They appreciated the hands-on opportunities where children could practice and refine their art-making skills and where they could exercise and express their imaginations. For one family, ArtQuest compensated for the parent's lack of background in art, helping them provide rich and exciting arts experiences for their children while gaining a deeper arts experience for themselves.

Several parents enjoyed watching their children engage in Martin ArtQuest because they learned about how their child learned. Many remarked how the interactive family gallery contributed to the intellectual stimulation and development of children. One father expressed, "I like to see how my child's mind is growing." Parents perceived that the activities in Martin ArtQuest encouraged independent thinking. In addition, parents frequently used the term "exposure" when commenting on the value of the interactive gallery. They valued how Martin ArtQuest helps to break down barriers to understanding and appreciating the arts.

Parents also value opportunities for social interaction, with family members and with others outside the family. This may be of special importance for home-school families whose children do not have regular classmates with whom they must get along. One home-school parent said, "As a mom you are always socializing your children...it means that they understand etiquette, behavior, what's appropriate, what's not appropriate and how to act in different situations. Other than playing basketball and soccer, they need to learn etiquette and behavior at other places. The art museum gives them that."

What Characteristics are Shared Across the Martin ArtQuest Gallery and Other Family Leisure Learning Destinations?

A focus of this study was to determine what characteristics of the Frist Center for the Visual Arts and the Martin ArtQuest, in particular, were shared with other family leisure learning choices. These families valued leisure learning experiences that provided:

- Opportunities to engage the varied interests of all family members;
- Experiences that are both educational and fun, engaging children in multiple ways of learning in exciting and innovative ways;
- Opportunities for parents to teach their children what they consider to be important, including explicit lessons, as in formal design or use of materials, and implicit lessons, as in how the family values art and aesthetics. As one parent said "Art is a way of life...not just a subject in our house, but a part of who we are";
- Environments that were child-friendly and age-appropriate, with some behavioral freedom, and opportunities to relax and unwind;
- Unique opportunities that stimulated creativity, sparked imaginations and encouraged independent thinking and self-expression;

- Options that allowed children to practice social skills with other children and adults outside of the family unit; and
- Environments that are colorful, clean, pleasant, with a contemporary “feel.”

Families also noted ways in which the Frist Center experience was different from their other leisure-learning destinations. The zoo experience, for example, was typically for a program that had a structured, classroom-like setting. Whereas at Martin ArtQuest, children could freely choose what they did and for how long, getting some personal assistance from staff. Similarly, at a science center, a mother noticed how the absence of staff interaction caused her children to be less focused in their attention than they were at Martin ArtQuest. In a library program, another parent mentioned how the program was for children, but not for whole families. In contrast, Martin ArtQuest provided an engaging experience for the whole family.

How do Families Make Connections Between the Museum Experience and their Home Life?

Most of the parents in the study went to great lengths to situate a family leisure learning experience within a larger context of the child’s life. This finding may be influenced by the high number of home-schooling families. However, the other families also mentioned specific activities following leisure-learning outings. For some families, these connections included journaling and drawing about places they visit, initiating art-making projects inspired by what they saw and did at the Frist Center, selecting books and activities that relate to themes they encountered at the Frist, and discussions at home about their adventures, particularly when one parent or another sibling was not on the visit.

Participation in study

Parents were asked what effect, if any, participation in this research might have had on the family. In general, the effect of the study was to enhance intentionality in the parents. Many parents noticed that they were more intentional about their choices for the like-site visits than they would be normally about a family outing. Some were more intentional about how they formulated and enacted the learning experience. A home-school mom said, “I already knew that we made connections but this has had me thinking about how to say that out loud.” Some parents said they thought more about their activities and related discussions, anticipating the follow-up interview questions after each visit. One family said her family continually enjoyed that special feeling of being connected to the larger study, to something beyond their family and their city. Several families grew so fond of their research assistant that their friendships continued to grow after the study.